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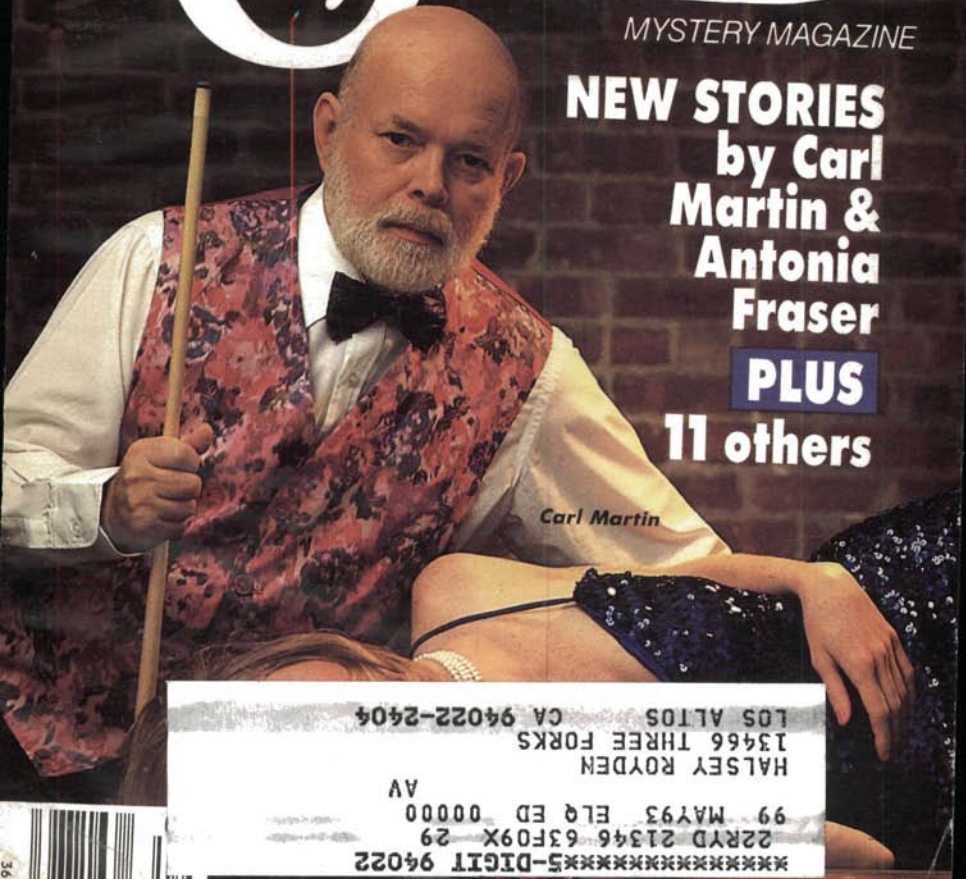

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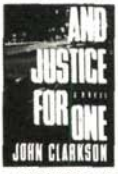

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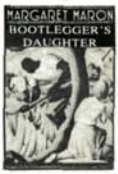

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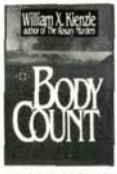

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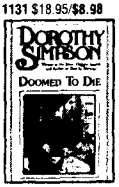

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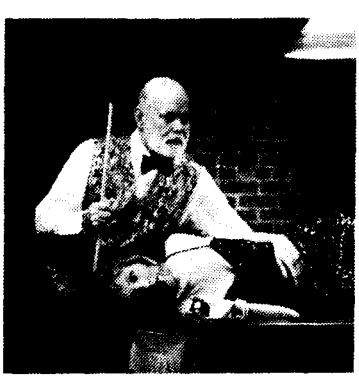

On our cover are CARL MARTIN and KATHY DICKINSON
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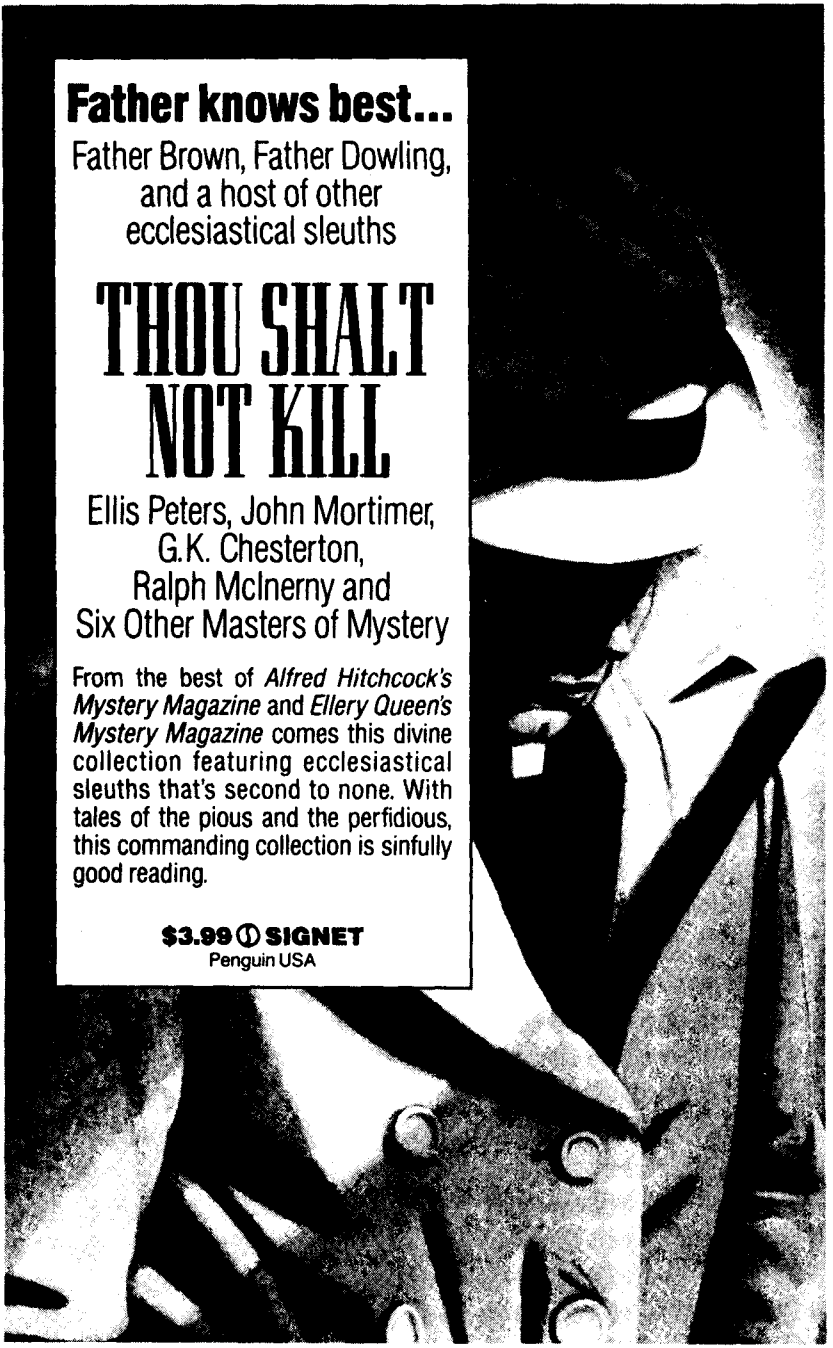
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No one can write a caper story like Carl Martin, and in this clever new adventure he creates one of the most unlikely bands of criminals ever to plan a heist. . . .

SOMETHING VENTURED

by CARL MARTIN

It was a typical July evening in Los Angeles. The daytime temperature had been over a hundred and now it wasn't much cooler. A hot, dry breeze was coming from the desert at about five miles per hour, drying the sweat as soon as it popped onto my brow. My sport shirt was sticking to my back. I thought how nice it would be to have a convertible, or at least a car with air conditioning.

The freeway was filled with high-priced foreign cars, and old clunkers like the twenty-year-old Ford I drove. But the new automobiles looked somehow more shiny and sleek than they did in other cities, and the clunkers were far less rusty than they were back East.

Both men and machines were feeling the heat. I passed several vehicles, new and old, that had been pulled to the side of the road to allow their engines to cool.

I was forty-five and had been out of prison about three years. Three dull, boring years. A stretch in federal prison hadn't rehabilitated me, but it had done the next best thing—I'd lost my nerve. I could no longer be the lone-wolf bandit I had been. Since my release, I had eked out a living as a writer.

They say a writer should write about what he knows, so I had become a specialist in big-caper crime stories. Unfortunately, I was two decades too late. The short-story market had dried up for that

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kind of fiction, and the current TV shows were all either situation comedies or westerns. I might have written a book, but after a life devoted to finding and following shortcuts, I didn't have the staying power it takes to write a novel.

Now I had a feeling my luck was about to change. I had been dragging my feet long enough. As they say, nothing ventured, nothing gained. I had to do something, even if it was wrong. It was time to put a plan I'd been considering into action. All I had to do was toss out the bait, be cautious, reel them in slowly, and let everyone think the final idea was someone else's. Nothing to it.

I pulled off the freeway at Laurel Canyon Boulevard, crossed Ventura, and climbed through the canyon till I reached Mulholland Drive. Then I turned right and snaked along the crest of the mountains until I reached the narrow lane where Rita Penny lived. The structure was a pseudo-Spanish bungalow with white walls and a red tile roof. She had planted flowers along the front of the building.

As usual, I was late for our monthly writers' meeting. There were already a couple of cars filling Rita's carport, so I parked on the street and walked back. The windows were open, telling me Rita's air conditioning hadn't been fixed. The thought of sitting in her sweltering living room made me slow my pace.

Alfie Norton's high-pitched voice drifted out an open window: "He reached for his gun and I shot him, shattering his kneecaps. His legs flew from under him and he crashed, screaming, to the barroom floor like a sack of bloody garbage . . ."

Alfie wanted to be a writer. He had even sold a couple of short stories, despite the fact that he'd never had an original thought in his life. Even his style was borrowed. From what little I'd heard, I guessed the last book he had read was either an early Spillane Mike Hammer novel, or something by one of Spillane's imitators. So far he had resisted the temptation to rewrite Hemingway, or perhaps he hadn't discovered him.

I opened the screen door and stepped into the living room. It looked like something out of a western movie—pine paneling, a couple of leather armchairs and a sagging leather couch, a few wicker chairs filling in the gaps against the wall near the open windows. A wagon-wheel coffee table sat in front of the couch, and Frederick Remington prints hung on the walls.

Beside the doorway was a varnished wooden plaque with several pegs sticking out and the inscription: LEAVE YOUR SIDEARMS HERE. I always smiled when I saw it.

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Rita's dead husband had decorated the house before marrying her. He had been a writer of westerns, "sagas" he had called them. She didn't particularly like his taste in furnishings, but it would have taken money to change it. Her part-time job at a local hospital didn't earn her any more money than I was making, which wasn't much.

Alfie Norton was sitting on the floor between the two scuffed and worn leather armchairs. He was twenty-seven years old, married, and a new father, but I couldn't help thinking of him as a kid. He seemed to look, think, and act like a teenager. He was wearing tight jeans and a red T-shirt he'd bought from one of the stuntmen's organizations. His mouse-colored hair was far longer than was fashionable. An inscription on the front of the T-shirt read: TO HELL WITH DIALOGUE—LET'S WRECK SOMETHING! He favored clothes that had to be read.

In the armchairs sat Harvey and Mary Farris, the oldest couple in our writing group. Harvey was a fifty-eight-year-old retired auto dealer. Six foot three, slim as an eel, and with thick silver hair, he looked great in the western clothing he always wore. By contrast, Mary was short and squat, had a mop of unkempt, dirty gray hair, and favored wrinkled cotton-print house dresses.

Finding Alfie sitting at their feet wasn't a surprise. He always seemed to be there, even when he wasn't. Harvey Farris had socked away a few millions before he stopped selling cars, and his wife, Mary, was our most successful writer. She cranked out sexy adult westerns under the name Carson Colt, a new one every other month. Most of them found their way into film or onto the TV screen. Harvey and Mary were who Alfie wanted to be when he grew up.

The aroma of fresh-brewed coffee came from the kitchen, followed by Rita Penny, carrying a tray with cups and the coffee pot. She set it on a table next to the liquor bottles and glasses that were already there.

Rita, thirty-seven, was the widow of Ward Penny, a good writer who had a bad heart. She had met him in the hospital shortly after his first heart attack and they had been together three years when he had his second and final one. He left her with the little bungalow where we were meeting and a pile of debts.

She was wearing a starched white nurse's uniform that rustled when she walked, white nylons, and white, rubber-soled shoes. She had the easy stride of a tomboy who has grown up to become a confident and self-assured woman.

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Rita was slender, had black, shoulder-length hair and huge blue eyes that always seemed to look through me. She wore no make-up. No one would have called her beautiful, but she was attractive in a basic, no-nonsense way. We had been seeing each other for a couple of months.

I stood, leaning against the wall while Alfie continued to read his terrible, pointless story. Just as he finished, the screen door opened again and Bill McDade and George Greene arrived.

McDade was a fifty-two-year-old retired army officer and police buff. He wrote mediocre police procedural novels, the first of which had been his best. Scripted by an Academy Award-winning screenwriter and directed by another award winner, it had been made into a blockbuster movie almost ten years before. Nothing he had written since had been very good. With his close-cropped hair, stocky build, and aggressive walk, he reminded me of every cop I'd ever known.

He thought like a cop, too. I'd been told he had informed the others it was just a matter of time before I did something criminal and was sent back to prison. He was the only one there I didn't like, the one who could cause me trouble.

George Greene, the other late arrival, was our only black member. A writer of conventional mysteries, he had white hair and skin so black it was nearly blue. He was of medium height and build, except for his heavy shoulders, and I used to kid him that a picture of him looked like a negative of me. He was as dark as I was fair. Like me, he wore running shoes, baggy cotton trousers, and a sport shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

Mary Farris made a few comments about the story Alfie had read. She pointed out a weakness or two and praised a couple of strong points. She was trying to give him a gentle nudge in the right direction without bruising his ego too badly.

While she spoke, McDade and Greene went to the liquor set-up and fixed themselves drinks. I waited until they had seated themselves on the couch beside Rita and everyone was looking around to see who would read next. Then I pushed away from the wall, reached into my hip pocket for the snub-nosed revolver I had there, and hung it by its trigger guard from one of the pegs on the plaque. After that, I took a seat and casually crossed my legs.

They were all watching me. Alfie had his mouth hanging open in surprise. Greene's eyes seemed unusually round, and McDade looked like he was about to pull out a pair of handcuffs and snap

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them onto my wrists. Convicted felons aren't allowed to own or carry firearms.

"Joe, have you gone crazy?" Rita asked.

"Now that I have everyone's attention," I said, "I want to tell you a story."

I leaned forward and cleared my throat. "Years ago, there was a robbery at an armored car company in Buffalo, New York. What made it unusual is that one man did it by himself.

"The main garage was a square, one-story cinder-block building. And every evening after the last race at the Fort Erie, Canada, race track, a truck would arrive from the track. It carried American currency collected at the betting windows. Only one man remained on duty to meet the truck.

"The bandit waited until it was a particularly hot summer evening. Then he entered the building by simply stepping through one of the large, low windows the guard inside had raised to cool the place. When the truck arrived, and the crew thought they were safe inside the garage, he took a canvas sack containing $340,000 from them and fled."

George Greene's face was split by an appreciative grin. "How come I never heard about that before?" he asked. "That one deserves to be in the record books."

"It probably would have been, but he didn't get away with it. He ran outside, got into his waiting car, and it refused to start. He was still sitting there, pumping the accelerator and grinding his starter, when the police arrived a few minutes later. The newspaper said the car probably had vapor lock."

"So, what's the point?" McDade asked.

"I'm just giving you a little background. At the time, I thought if that guy could figure out how to get that currency shipment without firing a shot, so could I. So I spent a few weeks studying the armored car garage and the route from the track."

"Did you do it?" Harvey Farris asked. There's nothing like a big caper story to get a man's interest.

"Yes, I did. But it wasn't something I could do by myself. It would have taken three or four people to pull it off."

"It would probably make a great story, though," Alfie Norton enthused.

"Yeah, but I always thought the scheme was too good to waste on fiction. I always thought I'd like to do it someday."

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"You 'always thought,' " Mary Farris echoed. She was quick. "What's different now?"

"Now I think my plan would be perfect to build a book around," I said.

"You couldn't write a book," McDade said, unkindly.

"Probably not," I admitted. "But *we* could."

"We?" someone asked.

"Sure, there have been a lot of successful books that were written by committees."

Everyone was quiet for a couple of minutes while they toyed with that thought. Then Mary asked, "What do you have in mind?"

"Well . . ." I said, pretending to talk off the top of my head. "We could . . . ah . . . create a bunch of characters much like ourselves. Have them decide to rob the armored car using my plan, then each of us write a couple of chapters." Then, to set the hook more firmly, I told them my plan.

"Say," George Greene exclaimed. "That *would* work!" He sounded surprised.

"Sure, it would," I said.

"No, it wouldn't," Bill McDade said. He got to his feet and began walking around the room with that cop walk of his. "It would be completely out of character for people like us to commit an armed robbery no matter how good the plan was." He pointed an accusing finger at me. "I wouldn't put anything past Joe Dyson here, but can any of you imagine yourselves running around with loaded guns and maybe using them?"

I didn't give anyone the chance to answer. "There would be no loaded guns," I said.

"Your plan calls for guns," McDade pointed out.

"Sure, it does." I went to the plaque, took down the .38, and handed it to McDade. "This kind—realistic toys. No one can be hurt with one of these, even by accident."

There were more questions, but I had been thinking about this for a long time. I was ready with the answers.

Finally, when I had almost given up hope, Mary began to nod her head. "You know," she said, "that really is an excellent plan."

Alfie and George Greene quickly agreed.

"Let's do it," her husband, Harvey, said.

"You mean you want to write the book?" McDade asked, apparently forgetting that Harvey wasn't a writer.

"No," Harvey said. "I want to do the crime."

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Grandmotherly Mary continued to nod. "So do I," she said.

"And so do I," both Alfie and George chimed in.

Rita came over to stand beside me. She put her hand on my shoulder. "I guess I'll have to come along, too," she said. "Someone has to keep Joe out of trouble."

McDade stared at us for a long moment. Then he asked, "How much money did you say the truck carries?" And I knew I had him, too.

"There was $340,000 when it was robbed the first time, but today it's three times as much."

"A million," McDade said softly, and I could see him doing the mental arithmetic to arrive at his share.

We didn't talk about writing the rest of the night. We were too busy working out the details.

When I was a teenager, I had always been described as a bad influence. Parents never wanted their sons to associate with me. I was surprised how little had changed over the years.

The following afternoon I went to a large toy store on Hollywood Boulevard and bought four more replica revolvers and a replica of the Thompson submachine gun. At the same time, everyone else was out buying one or two pieces of the clothing or equipment we'd need.

By the end of the week we were ready. Rita had managed to get a couple of weeks off from her job at the hospital, and Alfie, George, and McDade, the married men, told their wives they were going hunting in Oregon. The rest of us had no one we had to answer to.

We took three cars. Rita's Volvo was better than my wreck, so I rode with her. George drove by himself because a salt-and-pepper team might be remembered. And everyone else piled into Harvey Farris's big Lincoln.

It took us two days to reach Chicago, sleeping in the cars and stopping for gas at large service stations. We always paid cash so there would be no credit card trail.

In Detroit, we rented two Ford Taurus sedans, a blue one and a grey one, because that was the make and model FBI agents favored, and left two of our cars in long-term parking at the airport. Then, while everyone else took the long way to Buffalo, Rita and I crossed into Canada, drove directly to the Peace Bridge, and reentered the States, shaving a hundred miles and several hours off the trip.

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By the time the others reached Buffalo, Rita and I had rented an empty store, blacked the windows, and set up seven canvas cots inside. There would be no motel or hotel records to show we'd ever been there.

That evening we sat at the rear booth in a Denny's Restaurant and went over what we had to accomplish the next day. Then we returned to the vacant store and went to sleep.

In the morning Alfie and I went to a parking garage three blocks from the Federal Building. While I drove, he sat beside me reading a John LeCarre´novel. I imagined his next story would be about spies, but I didn't point out that the Cold War was over and no one wanted spy stories anymore.

I parked on the roof. The third floor had been leased by the government for official vehicles, so we took the stairs down to it. Half a dozen unmarked FBI cars were parked near the stairway. I removed the front license plate from one, and Alfie stooped down and got one from another. In less than a minute we were heading back to our car with the two plates.

I spent the rest of the day making plaster-of-Paris molds of the plates, pouring quick-hardening resin into the molds, and painting the counterfeit plates the proper colors. While they were still wet, I dusted the surface with tiny glass beads to make them reflective.

The next day, Alfie and I returned to the parking garage to return the stolen plates. With luck, no one would have noticed they had been missing. The two FBI cars didn't appear to have moved. They were parked in the same spots.

Then we met the others and took a late bus to the Fort Erie track. We spent the afternoon enjoying the fresh air and sunshine. After the last race, we hung around long enough to watch the track security escort the armored car crew to their truck. They carried a bulging money sack the size of a suitcase.

During the ride back to Buffalo, we were all grinning so broadly the other passengers must have thought we were big winners at the track.

Time was getting short. It was the last week of the racing meet and there were only two days remaining.

Mary left the store at 8:00 A.M., carrying her knitting bag. The rest of us spent the next hours getting ready and rehearsing our parts. Then we piled into the two rental cars with counterfeit tags installed. The plates had been mounted in chrome brackets so their

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extra thickness wasn't obvious. They had other flaws, too, but we figured if anyone looked close enough to see them, the game would be up anyway.

Rita was wearing a severe dark blue suit with a plain white blouse. The rest of us, except George Greene, wore business suits. He had on slacks and a light-weight cotton jacket with the letters FBI across the back in yellow letters six inches high. George and Harvey had colored their hair with a water-based dye to look younger and both wore false mustaches. Neither looked like himself.

We drove directly to the Peace Bridge with three to a car, parking directly in front of the U.S. Customs House in spaces marked OFFICIAL USE ONLY. Then we got out of the cars and stood talking. Customs officers entered and left the building, glanced curiously at us, but didn't challenge our right to be there.

Through the window, I could see several men inside behind a high counter, staring out at us. One sat at a computer console. A heavyset, grey-haired man said something to him and he began punching keys.

I moved closer to McDade. "They're running our plates right now," I told him.

"Are you sure it'll work?" he asked for the hundredth time.

I shrugged. "We'll soon know," I said, "but I'm willing to bet my share of the loot it'll come back *Confidential.*"

He smiled wryly. "If you're wrong, there'll be no loot to share." He'd figured that out all by himself.

A few minutes later, the man inside looked up from his keyboard and said something to the others. They lost interest in us and went back to their work.

"It worked," I announced.

McDade made an elaborate show of looking at his watch. Then he marched inside with the rest of us tagging behind him. For the first time since I'd known him, his cop walk didn't irritate me.

"Who's in charge here?" he demanded as we all hung badge cases from our breast pockets. The badges were actually Philadelphia police lieutenant's shields. I'd bought six of them and had them gold-plated at a little shop in East L.A. They could pass for FBI badges even with people familiar with the real thing. If no one looked closely, that is. Always if no one looked closely.

The heavyset man stepped forward.

"What time does the bus from Fort Erie get here?" McDade asked.

The man looked at his watch. "Any time now," he said.

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"We're interested in one of the passengers," McDade told him. Then he seemed to notice that one of the clerk's eyes was popping out of his head. He turned to look at us. George Greene was bringing up the rear with the Thompson submachine gun hanging casually from the end of his right arm.

McDade waved in a gesture of dismissal. "Put that thing back in your vehicle," he ordered. "We won't be needing it."

When the bus appeared, the customs agent walked over to it with us and stood there watching. Rita and I followed him when he climbed aboard to walk down the aisle, asking each passenger in turn, "Where were you born?"

When he reached Mary Farris, Rita and I took over. We got her out of her seat and walked her to the rear of the bus. I blocked the aisle while Rita ran her hands over the older woman, simulating a quick body search.

She came up with a plastic bag filled with suspicious white powder and snapped a pair of handcuffs onto Mary's wrists. Then we hustled her off the bus, crying, and over to one of our waiting cars. McDade paused to thank the customs agent for his cooperation before we drove off.

Back at the vacant store, we sat on a couple of the cots and rehashed the whole operation, trying to find anything that might be improved. We couldn't. At last, Harvey Farris peeled off his false mustache and gave his wife a hug.

"You should get an Academy Award for that performance," he said. "We all should."

McDade was the only specter of gloom. "Taking that money sack from the armored car won't be as easy as it was to get Mary off the bus," he said.

"No," I said, "it'll be easier. That bus could have been a problem. Suppose there had been a real smuggler aboard? He might have panicked when we climbed on to get Mary. There's no telling what might have happened. We can be certain that armored car crew won't try to resist federal agents."

"That's right," Greene seconded. He hefted the Thompson replica. "Or my little toy. Did you see their eyes bug out in the Customs House?"

"It's like we are playing April Fool, only we have the month wrong," I said. Everyone laughed.

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The adrenaline was pumping in all of us. It was an hour before any of us wanted to stop celebrating our success. Then we went out to eat in ones and twos to keep from being remembered.

When Rita and I were waiting for our dessert in Denny's, I spotted Alfie in a booth by himself. He was busy scribbling in a thick notebook. I had to marvel at how he could think of his writing with everything that was going on. It made me reevaluate him. Anyone who was that determined to make it as a writer would surely succeed. It was just a matter of time.

There had been one disquieting thing that day. When McDade let his jacket swing open so the customs agent could see his holstered revolver, I had seen it, too. It'd had ivory grips. None of the replica revolvers I had bought on Hollywood Boulevard had ivory grips. I kept that fact to myself.

Everyone else slept late the next day, but I was out of the store before anyone could ask where I was going. I bought a canvas sack similar to the one used to transport the race track currency, stuffed it with dummy bundles of paper, and put it in the trunk of the blue Taurus. I've never been accused of being too trusting.

The robbery went off without a hitch. While the "arrested" armored car crew was being hustled into the back seat of the grey Taurus, I placed the money sack in the blue's luggage compartment beside the dummy satchel. We sped away in minutes with no one the wiser. The customs officers even waved goodbye to us.

We stopped a mile away to handcuff the crew around a telephone pole beside the thruway. Then we raced to the parking lot behind a school on Elmwood Avenue to remove the phony plates and put the Michigan tags back on the cars.

McDade got there ahead of us and finished first. Then he came over to me and stood menacingly with his hand on the butt of the ivory-handled revolver.

"I want to carry the money in my car," he said past tight lips.

"No problem," I answered. I went to the rear of the blue Taurus, lifted out the dummy sack and gave it to him. I'd never seen him look so angry.

When [illegible] and I left the parking lot, we headed directly for the thruway. At the intersection of Sheridan and Elmwood, we saw [illegible] standing on the corner.

"Why [illegible] out of the car," Alfie complained when I [illegible]

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"Don't worry about it," I told him. "Climb in. We have plenty of room."

The plan called for us to spend the night in the store and leave town in the morning after the initial search had passed. That's what we did. McDade never showed up. I figure he drove all the way to Erie, Pennsylvania, before stopping to look at the money. I would have loved to have seen his expression when he discovered the sack was stuffed with cut-up telephone books.

The next day everyone was awake at first light, but we remained inside the store until traffic picked up. George Greene took the guns, badges, and just about everything else that could be incriminating to the foot of Ferry Street and dumped them into the river. The rest of us stopped at the UPS office on our way out of the city to ship the money to Rita's address in Los Angeles.

We drove straight through to Detroit and rejoined Greene there. He turned in the blue Taurus and learned that McDade had already returned the other rental. I half expected McDade to jump out at us when we went to pick up the cars in the long-term parking lot, but he didn't.

We retraced our route across the country the same way we had come. Only this time we were one man short. No one missed him.

The newspapers were filled with stories about the robbery. The FBI was looking for a gang of seasoned professionals, but they admitted they had few clues to go on. That made us feel more confident, but it didn't stop us from looking through our rear windows more often than necessary. None of us would have been surprised to see an army of federal agents in hot pursuit.

I suppose McDade took a bus or plane out of Detroit, but I never did find out for sure how he got back to California. I only know that when I drove to his home in Sherman Oaks to give him his share of the loot, he answered the door. He took the package without a word. He didn't even have the courtesy to be embarrassed.

It took about two weeks for the stories to disappear from the newspapers. It was two months before we stopped looking over our shoulders and resumed our normal lives. We didn't talk about the robbery even among ourselves. It was almost as though doing so might jinx us in some way.

But none of the others hesitated to spend his share. As usually happens with a first big score, the money ran through fingers like water. They all thought of the loot in terms of money, something to spend. Capital was a concept they didn't understand.

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Rita paid off all her debts and had her air conditioning repaired. Alfie quit his job at the shoe store where he had worked and devoted all his time to writing. George Greene bought his wife a new car and got another for himself. The Farrises took a first-class cruise to the Orient. When I drove past McDade's house one night I noticed there was a new wing and the old roof had been replaced. They all made dozens of smaller purchases, too.

Like the Farrises, I had been involved for the action, not the money. All I did was trade in my old Ford for a slightly less ancient convertible. I didn't want to set off any alarms in my parole officer's head.

Rita and I were spending more time together despite the fact that she now worked full-time at the hospital. And I began thinking of marriage. She wanted a husband, and I knew a writer could always use a wife with a job. I was almost convinced it was the thing to do.

Then a year after the robbery, I received a postcard from McDade, saying he wanted to hold our next meeting at his house. I was pretty sure I knew what was on his mind. We had gotten away clean, and his share was gone. Full of confidence, but like me, needing the bravery only a group could provide, he wanted us to do it again. If it hadn't been him, it would have been one of the others. I had been expecting it.

The day of the meeting I drove to Encino to kill a little time at a bookstore before driving to McDade's place. I read the dust jackets on a few best sellers and bought myself a couple of new books. Then I took a leisurely drive to McDade's home.

All except Alfie had arrived ahead of me. They were gathered around the pool table in McDade's new game room, waiting.

McDade didn't waste any time. "Let's do it again," he said as I came through the doorway.

His selective memory was amazing. He had forgotten the sneaky trick he had tried to pull in Buffalo, or he hoped I had.

He pressed on: "The robbery went off like magic," he said. "There wasn't one problem. We're a great team. We can pull off another one somewhere. I know it."

"That's right," Greene said. "We can do it again."

The Farrises nodded agreement.

Rita remained silent, taking her lead from me.

I shook my head. "No, we can't."

"But we got away with it once. You're not sore about that little misunderstanding we had in Buffalo, are you?"

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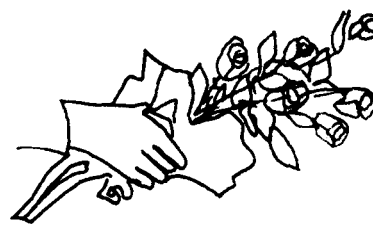
"There's no misunderstanding," I told him, "and we didn't get away with it. We'll all be in jail within a week."

McDade's mouth fell open in consternation. "What the hell are you talking about?" he blustered.

"This!" I tossed a book into the center of the pool table. "Alfie had a book published today. It's called *April Fool in August,* the story of how a group of Los Angeles writers rob an armored car in Buffalo and get away with it. He even uses our real names."



ON OUR COVER

Al Nussbaum, a.k.a. Carl Martin, sold his first story to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* in 1967. Since then, writing under more than a dozen bylines, he has contributed to a wide variety of publications, including *Harper's* magazine and *The American Scholar*. Nearly a hundred of his stories have appeared in *EQMM* and *AHMM;* a good number of these were subsequently included in best-of-the-year anthologies and foreign language collections. Mr. Nussbaum has also introduced many new readers to the mystery genre with his young-adult suspense novels published under the pseudonym Carl Martin.

Like many writers, Al Nussbaum tried his hand at other occupations before turning to writing. He has been a salesman, locksmith, gunsmith, and licensed aviation mechanic. He has helped to place several new authors with *EQMM* through his contacts as a teacher of creative writing, and continues to offer new writers instruction at East-Coast writers' seminars.

A former regional vice-president of the Mystery Writer's of America, the author currently makes his home in Buffalo, New York, where he continues to spin his compelling yarns, "telling lies about people who never lived."

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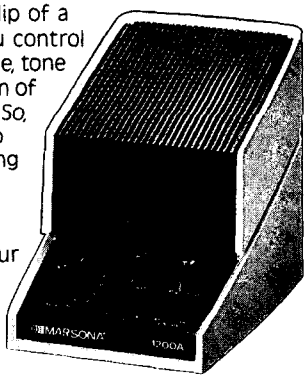

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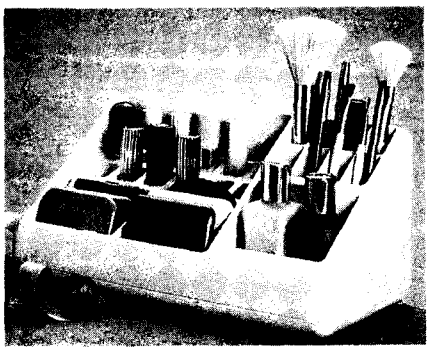

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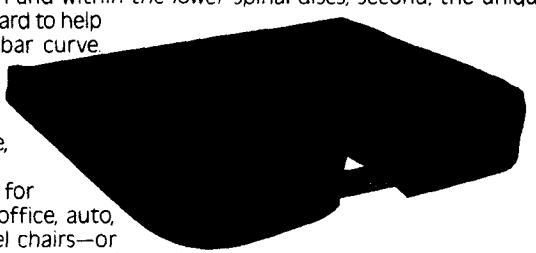

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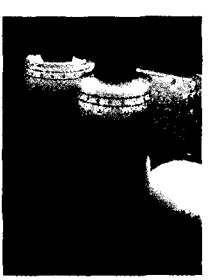

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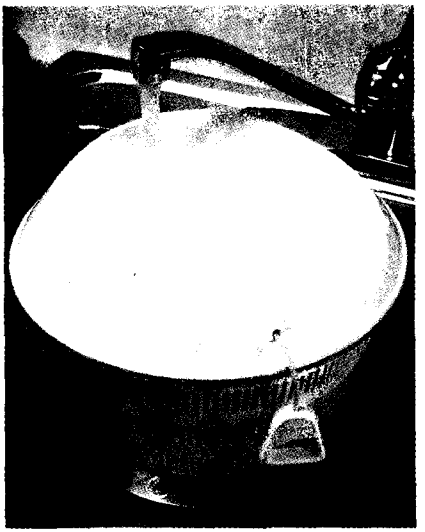

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a ***NEW*** short story by

TIM HEALD

Every other guest was paired off. Only the one single man and the one lone woman held the potential for excitement and the unexpected . . .

A WINTER BREAK

by TIM HEALD

The woman had arrived the night before. The landing had been as tight as it always is on Madeira, though how much that had to do with the configuration of the runway and how much with the machismo of the Portuguese pilot she wasn't sure. Her friends had warned her about the landing so she had not found it as shocking as some of her fellow passengers, gentle, elderly folk with cardigans and plastic macs who clapped with relief as they taxied towards the terminal.

She took a cab to the hotel, checking in, and went straight to bed. Even on the package deal the hotel was expensive but it was essential she stayed there and, thank God, she had squirrelled away a little nest egg of her own. She hardly dared think what she would have done if her mother had not owned a house with spare space in it. The bailiffs had taken everything. She had never spared much sympathy for other people whose companies crashed, always believed, subconsciously, that it served them right and they would bounce back with some new operation in a matter of weeks. She knew better now. Living with her mother and temping was not what she had reckoned on in the days of her pomp as the chairman's wife.

After breakfast on her balcony she wandered downtown, strolled along the marina, visited the museum of religious art, explored the market, marvelling at the fruit and grimacing at the long lines of

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shiny, baleful black espada fish. Espada cropped up on the menu at lunch, fried with boiled potatoes, in an empty restaurant in a street full of empty restaurants where they gave her a glass of sweet and sour sercial wine on the house. Then she looked at some lace and embroidery and bought some interesting leather boots for her son, who would be seven years old next week. At tea-time she walked back up the hill past the pink governor's palace, past several shuffling couples she recognised from the airplane, past flocks of garish and faintly unsettling bird-of-paradise flowers.

Back at the hotel she kicked off her shoes and lay on the bed for an hour or so reading a slim volume by J. L. Carr, a comforting English novelist of whose work she was particularly fond. At six she started to run a bath, lay in it a long time, then dried slowly and dressed in expensive silk underwear and a tight, short, elegant but simple little black dress. She took care over her makeup and applied just a little too much Chanel Number Five to be quite discreet. For a few moments she stood silently looking at a photograph in a silver frame which she had put on her bedside table as soon as she arrived. Then she leant forward and kissed it lightly, sighed once and went downstairs to the bar.

The man spent the day in his suite.

He spent most of his time in his suite and sometimes didn't leave it for days on end. On the third of December the day the woman arrived on her week-long minibreak, he read the previous day's English newspapers and watched his favourite video which was a BBC record of the 1981 Test series between England and Australia. Once or twice he turned on his short-wave radio to listen to the World Service News. Occasionally he would sit at his table and write in pencil on a lined pad. It seemed to cause him difficulty and as often as not he would crumple the page into a ball and throw it in the wastebasket. He was trying to write a pseudonymous autobiography.

At one o'clock a maid came with a fillet steak, medium rare, chips, and a green salad with a blue-cheese dressing. Also a half bottle of quite good claret (Chateau Talbot). He ate it fast as if he was used to snatching meals on the hoof between important meetings. After he had finished he belched and spent half an hour looking out his window at the sea, which was grey and rough. Then he went into the bedroom, removed his shoes, and lay down on the bed. He lay there for the best part of an hour with his eyes closed but not sleep-

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ing. Then he went back to his desk and tried some more writing. When it didn't work he stared out at the sea.

At six he poured himself a large Scotch and ran a bath heavily frothed with Badedas. Afterwards he stood in a towelling bathrobe, smoked a half Corona, and looked out at the lights of Funchal. The maid came in to turn the bed down. He eyed her thoughtfully and decided that he would dine in the hotel grill. Because it was a Grand Hotel that meant black tie. He had had a dinner jacket run up by a little man in town and it was fine as far as it went, though he regretted the Savile Row number he had owned before.

It was five past seven when he patted his cheeks with Chanel Pour Homme, pocketed his key and walked slowly towards the bar.

The woman sat at a table for two drinking a white wine spritzer and smoking a Marlboro. A pianist in a plum-coloured jacket played a superior musical wallpaper medley in which "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square" was a unifying theme and barmen and waiters shimmied about with cocktail shakers and saucers of nuts and crisps and translucent cocktail onions. There were several couples and one group of four sitting at other tables. They were late middle-aged to elderly, seemed married, and looked bored. The wives eyed the woman with obvious distaste. She was thirty something, she had shapely legs and just too much makeup. Of course the wives with their pale hair and their tinted glasses on gold chains did not like what they saw. The woman saw them looking and knew perfectly well what they were thinking, so she stared back at them, crossing her legs and blowing smoke down her nostrils. Then she pretended to study the menu.

When the man came in he enveloped the room with an appraising, all-embracing stare, sweeping round the whole area in a smooth arc like the beam of a lighthouse. He was not interested in the couples or the foursome because they were what he had come to expect, but as his eyes lit on the woman he paused momentarily. She was looking at him, as was everybody else, because it was a quiet night and they were bored and he had made what might be termed "an entrance." For a second their eyes locked and then the man continued with his sweep until he reached the barman, smiled glacially, and said, "Good evening Felipe."

Felipe inclined his head, reached for a bottle of Chivas Regal on the shelf behind him, poured it over a handful of ice cubes in a heavy

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tumbler, and pushed it across the counter together with the little bowls of things to eat. The man speared two onions with a stick, took a slurp of his drink, and seemed to chew on it before swallowing. Then he too fell to studying his menu with an exaggerated display of concentration.

Dinner was a piece of theatre. The woman went through before the man, who followed about ten minutes after. She was at a table in a window from which you could see a glitter of stars and city lights. He was seated similarly but at the far end of the room. Between them lay a no-man's land of empty tables and pockets of monosyllabic couples, plus the one quartet. In among them, overdressed waiters and sommeliers shimmered about with bottles of wine in wicker baskets and stacked oversize plates on their arms. Occasionally there would be a whoosh of flame as one of the men ignited alcohol over a slab of beef or a sticky crepe. The chandeliers and the drapes were theatrical too, although in a half-forgotten, histrionic style redolent of 1950s Brighton.

The staff and the other guests were half chorus, half audience. On the one hand, they contributed to the business of the evening, giving a muffled hubbub and sense of crowd to what would otherwise be an awkward tete-a-tete. On the other hand, they were the paying punters, all too aware of the dramatic tension in the air, all agog to see what was going to happen. Every other guest in the dining room was paired off and had been for a minimum of thirty years. Only the one single man and the one lone woman held the potential for excitement and the unexpected. The others knew this, and they willed something to happen.

The power of prayer is awesome, even in the dining room of a Grand Hotel on the Atlantic Ocean.

The man bolted his meal and the woman lingered. She was still sipping coffee and toying with her petits fours when he flung down his napkin and pushed back his chair. At the beginning of the meal he had reached his table without passing close to hers, but it would be possible to make the return journey by a different route. If he did he would be so close that it would be positively churlish not to acknowledge her. If he acknowledged her might he not go just a shade further . . . ? After all she was on a week-long mini-break and he was old enough, almost, to be her father.

The man smiled at her.

The woman smiled back.

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"I wonder," he said, "that is to say, would you join me in a liqueur? The hotel has some very fine nineteenth-century Madeiras. It would be a pleasure to introduce you to one."

"You're very kind but . . ."

Perhaps only the English make such a performance of offering and being offered a glass of wine. She accepted, of course, but not before a ritual gavotte of fluttering eyelashes and winsome smiles, of promises implicit yet unstated, of platitudinous pleasantries studded with a sub-text of impenetrable complexity. The man and the woman enjoyed a glass of 1893 Madeira together. No more, no less. Not true. Much more, much less. But how and why who knows?

"You're here on holiday?"

It was a wig. Quite a good wig as wigs go, but she could see the straightness of the line between the hair and the scalp, the sudden difference between the straggly real almost pubic grey stuff at the temples and the straight jet-black thatch above the wig-line. And it was ever so slightly crooked. Imperceptible to a casual observer, even perhaps to the maitre d' in a Grand Hotel, but to her an immediate faux-pas.

"Yes. Just a short break."

"Ah."

"And you?"

"A longish break." The man laughed.

The laugh did not come easily. Not just because he seemed not to be a man given to laughter and the laugh therefore seemed devoid of warmth and spontaneity, humour and life, and all that make a laugh worth laughing. It was something physical as well. When he stretched his face the skin somehow moved in the wrong way so that it no longer quite matched the bones beneath. The lines fell wrong, and the wrinkles were misplaced. Only a trained observer or someone who knew a great deal about the man would have noticed anything odd.

The woman gave a curious little start when the man laughed, almost as if she had half recognised someone but couldn't remember who they were. The sort of panicky reaction one has when one bumps into someone one knows perfectly well but out of context so one can't place them. Like meeting the vicar in a house of ill repute; or a tart in church. Whatever it was, the woman checked it instantly, and the man seemed not to notice.

It was not a long laugh.

"Have you been here before?"

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"No, never."

"Perhaps I could show you round. The north coast is very fine. Wild with waterfalls. And the drive across the mountains. At Encumeada you can see the north and south coasts. I could arrange a car."

The woman protested a little but not too much. The man insisted. He said it would be his pleasure. There was nothing, he told her, that could not be put off until tomorrow. Or the day after. Or, come to that, next week or even next year. The truth was that he was bored.

And so, next day, he showed her the west and north of the island. And the day after he took her to the east. He showed her the botanical gardens, the Paul de Serra and the Ribeira da Janela. He pointed out lunar volcanic rock formations and banana plantations and kapok trees. He talked of the history of the island, of Christopher Columbus and of John Blandy, who came from Dorset with General Beresford in 1801 and stayed to found a dynasty. He bought her espada fish to eat and vinho verde to drink.

Of himself he said nothing.

He made no sexual advance, nor did he make very serious attempts to get to know her better. It was as if he needed only the comfort of company, of having someone around who was not himself. It helped that she was attractive but not, apparently, in a physical sense. He liked to be surrounded by beautiful things but not, necessarily, to touch. Just once, seeming to notice her wedding ring for the first time, he said,

"You're married?"

"He died," she said.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"He killed himself. Money worries. He lost it all."

"Oh."

After a little silence she said,

"And you?"

And he said,

"That all seems a very long time ago."

This was as near to intimacy as they got until the week the woman's holiday was almost over.

"I wonder," she said, as they sat at what had now become their usual table, "if we might go for a walk tomorrow. I would awfully like to stroll along a levada."

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* * *

The levadas are the irrigation channels that criss-cross the island. They are a marvel of engineering, passing through mountains and ravines, sometimes in treacherous unlit tunnels. They now double up as a network of beautiful footpaths, affording miraculous views but also what the authors of the best Madeira guidebook describe as "danger of vertigo." The drops can be severe and there are not always railings.

"We could take a picnic," she said. "We'll get the driver to drop us off and pick us up again a few hours later."

He smiled indulgently. Although he was a standard shape and size and could not have been more than fifty-five at most, the man did not look like a walker.

"If that's what you'd like," he said.

She arranged the alfresco lunch through the kitchens of the hotel. It was not a very Madeiran selection because she wanted it to be a special, simple, memorable meal. Scottish smoked salmon with thinly sliced brown bread, Dublin bay prawns, rare fillet of beef, a hint of truffle, a perfect peach, stilton. To drink, a half bottle of La Grande Dame, another of Latour, and to end, a glass of hundred-year-old Blandy's Malmsey. Proper coffee in a thermos. It cost a lot of money and it really did mean that her little nest egg would be well and truly gone. The private detective, of course, had taken the bulk of it, but she didn't grudge him. He had done what she wanted.

"Oh and Joseph," she said, prettily, "could you let me have a proper knife? It's murder trying to cut things with a table knife. If you could let me have a real kitchen one. A Sabatier. Otherwise one spends all one's time struggling just to slice bread. And as for meat . . ." She smiled, as if at a private joke. "I do want it to go well," she said. "It's my only chance to say thank you after all he's done for me."

Joseph, the chef, nodded and smiled, thinking privately that the man was a lucky fellow.

It was a grand day for a picnic. December in Madeira can be wet and stormy but the sun was shining as their car hairpinned its way into the mountains, passing from the greenhouse effect of the coastal plain to the eucalyptus and heath trees of the heights. The driver dropped them at Ribeiro Frio and they walked downhill a little until they reached the Levada do Furado tumbling angrily through the

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woods, gorged with winter rain. The sun dappled the mossy banks and from time to time the path criss-crossed the levada on little stepping stones.

After a while the scenery began to change—the trees became sparser and more windswept, and the views opened out so that they were able to gaze towards the steep terraces above the north-coast villages. Here and there one could pick out a cross gleaming on top of a church spire.

The levada hugged the mountainside and the drop below became ever more precipitous. Presently however they came to a relatively wide ledge of grass where there was more than enough room to spread out and relax. The woman suggested they stop here for lunch, and the man seemed happy to acquiesce. She unslung her rucksack and unpacked.

It was warm in the sun and they were sheltered from any wind. It was also very beautiful. To disturb the tranquility would have been sacrilege, so they said very little. He ate and drank much more than she did, though he seemed not to notice that she was only pecking at the food and sipping at the drink.

Finally they arrived at the coffee and the Madeira and he sat, sated and blinking contentedly at the green hillsides and the blue ocean below and beyond.

She was rummaging in the rucksack.

"There's something I want you to see," she said.

And she passed him her photograph in its silver frame.

He took it, frowning stupidly, like a child being offered an unexpected gift. Then his eyes twitched and he glanced quickly from the picture to her and back.

"Your husband," he said.

"Yes," her voice was over-firm now, taut with the effort of seeming super-calm.

"So he . . ."

"He didn't feel he had any alternative," she said. "You took him over, you cleaned him out, you left him with very much less than nothing, and then you did your famous bunk. Perhaps he was right. Nothing but creditors, nothing but debts, no future, no prospects, a wife and child to support. So he booked into a cheap hotel with a bottle of Scotch and some sleeping pills, wrote a couple of letters, ran a bath, and was found by the chambermaid next morning. Nothing to it really. Happens all the time."

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He stared at her. His face seemed slack and drained, yet it was difficult to read it. Shock, horror . . . perhaps. Surprise, certainly. Maybe a suggestion of relief, even. Nothing to suggest remorse on the one hand or self-pity on the other.

"How did you find me?"

"Not difficult." She shrugged. "I hired a professional. The police didn't seem to find you that interesting. So you'd disappeared with a few million quid but it was mostly small investors, no one big enough to make an embarrassing fuss. The only person who might have come into that category was probably my husband, and he was conveniently out of the way. So why should they use valuable manpower chasing after a vanished swindler when they could be fabricating false evidence against Irish vagrants or beating up black teenagers. Much easier to write "Missing presumed dead" and forget all about you. I seem to have been practically the only person who wasn't prepared to do the same. My man knew the few plastic surgeons capable of doing the sort of job you needed, and it wasn't difficult to find someone to talk. After that one thing led to another."

He grimaced.

"You'll never be able to prove it. Even if you did, you'd never get extradition. I can sit here like Ronnie Biggs, the train robber in Brazil. Stay here as long as I like."

"Who said anything about proving anything? Or extradition? As far as I'm concerned, I'm more than happy that you stay here for the rest of your life."

He smiled. "So you want money. Is that what it comes down to?"

"Oh no." She smiled too. At least she flexed her mouth briefly. There was no humour in the gesture, which was more like that of an anaconda about to strike. "Money itself means nothing to me."

"What then?"

"I'm going to kill you."

A sudden deft gesture and the hotel kitchen knife, six inches of well-honed stainless steel, lay glistening in her right hand.

"I'm rather good with a knife," she said, "I found a friendly ex-SAS bloke who gave me a few lessons. I have to say he was quite impressed. Unlike you, I am also extremely fit and I can give you at least twenty years. So whatever you do, you haven't a chance."

He said nothing, just looked at her quietly and moistened his lips.

"Do you have anything to say?"

He shook his head, still staring at her, unblinking.

"Then stand up."

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He stood. There were bread crumbs on the front of his jacket and a drop of claret on his shirt.

She stood too and took a pace towards him, knife raised now, so that its point was aimed at his jugular six feet away.

Instinctively, he backed off. He did not seem particularly frightened, however. Almost resigned. His face—that alien plastic mask—gave nothing away. But he still reversed, realising perhaps that a struggle would indeed be useless as well, perhaps, as undignified. In a curious way he seemed to accept the situation, wanting only to carry it off with the correct style, which perhaps was why he brushed at the crumbs. He wanted to die with a clean front.

She took another step towards him. He took one back. She made a feint, and he tottered two half steps away. She lunged—or pretended to, and as he, frightened now despite himself, recoiled from the stroke, his back foot went over the edge of the precipice and came down on thin air. He staggered. She lunged again. He fell back. His mouth opened and his arms leaped high to grab on to something, anything, to steady himself, but there was nothing there. Again she lunged, knife steady in her fist, eyes fixed on his throat, but there was no need.

He only screamed after he went over the cliff. The sound echoed around the mountains for what seemed like an eternity, hanging in the air, bouncing like the man's body from one volcanic outcrop to another until at last it faded away into a total silence.

She had not even touched him. It was the sort of accident that could have happened to almost anyone.

The knife fell from her hand and, silently, the woman began to sob.

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a *NEW* Rosetta Street story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

The triangle of London bounded by Rosetta Street, Great Northern Prospect, and Cap-a-Pie Lane: a rough patch for a police detective, but for Inspector Caradoc it holds an irresistible fascination—especially that long-ago case concerning the Filmore-Legrange war, unfolded while Caradoc was stranded in a suburban outpost, its solution a mystery until a dying woman decides to talk . . .

CURSE OF THE IRISH KING

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Detective-Inspector Caradoc could wear a poker face with the best of them. Men whose expressions are always readable rarely get far in the Met Police: reprimands must be taken woodenly, informers heard without being given clues to the importance of their talk, senior idiots and bores listened to as if they were sages. Besides, Dai Caradoc hadn't entered Kitchener Ward of St. Asaph's Hospital without a warning . . .

Even so, the encounter taxed his powers.

"Mum isn't the same," Declan O'Higgins confided dolefully. Large though not imposing, watery eyes evasive, Declan had intercepted the policeman in a corridor leading to the ward where Doll O'Higgins lay. Even with his mother quite far off and invisible, the man was on edge. Declan might be middle-aged and run the O'Higgins family business, but everyone knew him for an apron-stringed wimp, well under Doll's thumb.

"Not the same at all," Declan O'Higgins nagged, addressing a fire extinguisher several inches to the left of Caradoc's shoulder. "You'll hardly recognise her, Mr. C. And what with Mum being . . . well,

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you know, a bit vain . . . try to pay her a compliment, eh?" A cynic could have heard hints of satisfied malice in the words.

"Thanks for the advice." Inspector Caradoc made to pass by. Declan was too gutless to be a villain and almost too timid for the traditional, petty dishonesties of a back-street shopkeeper, but Caradoc disliked him anyway.

Doll's son hadn't finished. Declan managed an act of courage by plucking at the policeman's arm. "Hang on, Mr. C., Mum's on drugs." Shockingly, he giggled. "Don't get me wrong, ol' Doll is not a junkie or anything. I just mean they are giving her sedatives, painkillers and stuff. She rambles a bit . . . a lot, actually. All the time, in strict point of fact. Don't go taking her seriously!"

Caradoc, poised between irritation and unkind amusement, stared at him. Declan, equally surprised to find himself assertive, wiped his sweaty brow with a matching hand. "Please," he added meekly, reverting to form.

"I'll bear it in mind," Inspector Caradoc promised. Instead of discouraging him, the officious chump had whetted his appetite. Yet when the ward sister directed him to a screened-off corner of the ward and he saw Doll O'Higgins, Caradoc needed self-discipline to muster a smile. Thinking: *Dear God, she looks awful.*

Doll had been a prominent local figure, in every sense of the phrase, since the 1960s. It wasn't just her fine body and lovely face with a mane of red hair, tamed fire drawing attention to the rest. Mrs. O'Higgins had something women could not buy and which many would shun. When men looked at her, they became acutely aware that she was naked under her clothes. In the least poetic terms, Doll had been terribly sexy. And as her unchivalrous son contended, terribly vain. Having worked hard all her life, Doll O'Higgins didn't need the artificial toil of aerobics, and at nearer sixty than fifty, had still turned heads in the street.

Not any more, Inspector Caradoc reflected, taking the bedside chair. The skull beneath the skin was distressingly evident, not just because she was bare of cosmetics. And chemotherapy had diminished Doll's bonfire of hair to lank, rusty wisps. Clearing his throat, he admitted, "I nearly asked how you're doing—but you never suffered fools gladly, eh?"

"Nice one," Mrs. O'Higgins observed. Strange to hear that voice, weak yet unmistakable, coming out of an emaciated stranger. "Married blokes who take it seriously—what a lot you miss, Dai. I could have made you play above your usual game, son."

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He did not doubt it. Doll O'Higgins, widowed after five years of marriage and single though never lonely thereafter, had led a thoroughly promiscuous life. Numerous men on both sides of the law (some of whom Inspector Caradoc saluted and called "sir," in his day) had been crazy about her. One such ex-lover, bitterly admiring, claimed that Doll had spoiled him for anyone else. "Lemonade won't do the trick, once you get the taste for champagne cocktails."

Her hand, not so much motionless as forgotten on the sheet, looked too fragile to hold. He compromised by resting his own alongside. "We had more fun flirting, gel. Like they say, it's better to travel hopefully than to arrive."

"You always were a smooth talker; the Welsh in you." Mrs. O'Higgins closed her eyes and he sensed her going away from him. Waiting, Caradoc remembered Doll in her prime. He had hoped, once, that money or a grievance might nudge her into turning informer—born and bred in the neighborhood, she knew everyone and was bound to have a treasury of pillow talk. Instead, Doll kept him on promised land, as market traders would put it. During a decade of sparring, he learned nothing. *Unless,* he confessed inwardly, *I'm not the model husband after all; maybe I needed an excuse to spend time with her.*

Doll O'Higgins emerged from pain as a tired swimmer labors out of the sea. "Turn and turn about is fair," she said thinly. "When I lost our Archie, you came up trumps. It meant a lot, senior copper and his wife at the funeral. And what you wrote on the wreath was beautiful, the little card. I never forgot that."

To his shame, Inspector Caradoc couldn't remember his condolence message. He had spoken or written so many. Doll's youngest child had been mentally handicapped, his dim but happy life ended by chasing a ball out of the shop, along an alley, and into traffic-laden Great Northern Prospect . . .

Doll said, "Now it's my turn. You always wanted to know stuff—as if I would ever be a grass. But what does it matter anymore?" For an instant, her eyes lit up and the original Doll returned. "Won't do you a scrap of good, mind. Else I'd never tell."

The ward sister, an Asian whose dignity lent elegance to a graceless uniform, treated Inspector Caradoc as a fellow professional. "Of course talking tires her. But she has asked several times about seeing you. Frankly, it can do no harm, now." An unspoken footnote

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being that the hospital could do the dying woman little good, for that matter, apart from easing her journey.

"Fair enough, I'll come back this evening. Can't stop now, due in court ten minutes ago." He jerked his chin at Declan O'Higgins, hovering just out of earshot of Sister's desk by the swing doors to Kitchener Ward. "It's just that the son seems a bit concerned . . ."

"His main concern," Sister said calmly, "is stepping into a dead person's shoes. Our concern is for the patient, yes? If it makes her happy, talking over old times . . . Leave Mr. O'Higgins to me."

Declan was nowhere to be seen when Caradoc returned. Either Doll O'Higgins had rallied a trifle, or Caradoc was getting accustomed to her transformed state. She was sitting up, and while her face was only a shade darker than the pillows, her sparse hair had been tidied.

Before he could speak, Doll asked, "Remember who introduced us, all those years ago?"

"Harry North," he replied instantly. "Him and me were on a watching job, lasted days. And he kept harping about this fabulous bird he'd started knocking around with. Best legs in the universe, he reckoned, and the rest wasn't far behind."

"Nor it was. Harry brought you along to that curry place, used to be in Cap-a-Pie Lane. 'I want to show young Dai what a lucky bloke I am,' he says. You were new to the CID, then. Harry said you had the makings, but you'd never do that well, too straight for your own good. Too sarcastic, as well."

Caradoc, hardly listening, wondered how he had gone so long without thinking of a man who had helped to shape his life. Detective-Inspector Harold Charles North, corner-cutter, getter of results, lover of life. Older than usual for his rank, because Harry had been a Royal Marine commando, done seven years in the service before joining the police. Exceedingly brave, very lucky, much envied and disliked. He had taken a liking to a green detective-constable, extricating Dai Caradoc from a few scrapes, showing him more than a few tricks of the trade. Harry himself had said that while good coppers were lucky, luck runs out. So it had. Such a daft way to go, though: Harry waiting at a red light in his latest flash car, when the gale sent one of Rosetta Street's rare trees crashing down to crush it and the driver beyond repair.

"I loved that beggar, whatever love means," said Doll O'Higgins. "Nearly married him, right against me principles. Imagine that."

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"Good bloke," Caradoc agreed abstractedly. Then amended, because the dead were owed honesty, "Hell of a bloke, anyway."

"Harry wasn't due no halo," she conceded. "Dare say it's bloody hot, where he ended up. I'll be finding out, soon enough." The prospect seemed to cheer Doll. She gave her visitor the ghost of a wicked grin. "So what shall we talk about? As if I didn't know . . ."

The Filmore-Legrange war had erupted, raged, and died out, literally, in the triangle of London bounded by Rosetta Street, Great Northern Prospect, and Cap-a-Pie Lane, after then-Constable Caradoc's departure. Imminent promotion took him to Bradore, a leafy suburb at the limits of the Met Police empire. He'd heard about it, naturally, believing that such lurid melodrama would suit Harry North. But if Inspector North made sense of the carnage, that tree had prevented him doing anything about it.

On Caradoc's return to the battlefield, years later, he learned more, though not much. Generally, whatever coroners and trial judges may uncover, street history tells a fuller story. Not this time. Everybody agreed that it had been a weird sort of conflict, with both opposing warlords snuffed out almost as soon as it began. Most folk were aware, if only as modern myth, of Mad Mike Legrange's notorious Big Contract. Few believed in it. And there knowledge, if that was the proper term, ended.

Except . . . Mad Mike Legrange's closest associate was a certain Tom Kite. He went North for a wedding, just before the first death, spent a month in jail after punching the best man senseless, and very wisely stuck around Newcastle for months afterwards. Tom's lips moved while he plowed through newspapers but he was fully literate—in that he could read between as well as along the lines.

Tom always swore that the whole business was a mystery to him; further, he'd hardly known Mad Mike Legrange, drank with the guy, but he drank with any amount of guys. . . . It was nothing to do with Tom and Tom did not want to know.

Once, however, aware of Inspector Caradoc's abiding interest in the affair, Tom Kite—drunk, trying to make trouble, or fumbling towards a deal after getting caught with a hot truck and hotter load—alleged, "That cow Doll O'Higgins may know a thing or three about Mad Mike getting stitched up."

Sober, Mr. Kite recanted, professed amnesia, and trudged off to do his time for the crime. Mrs. O'Higgins, told about Tom Kite's suggestion, seemed honestly nonplussed. "Me, luv? Give over, I

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never went out with either of those two loonies. I mean, they called him Mad Mike, but John Filmore was no great brain. Pair of psychos, if you ask me."

Yet ever since, Caradoc had been sure that she was lying. In a desultory, needling manner, he had made that clear whenever they chatted.

Doll O'Higgins, eyes sunken, hands folded and still, laughed breathily. "Stubborn little devil, you are. Proper Welsh terrier." And then she told him a story. He knew its broad outlines but Doll's grasp of detail amazed him.

John Filmore was a veteran villain, and by the early 1970s, almost an institution. Rosetta Street was his base, half the local traders paid him protection money, like their fathers before them, but his interests stretched as far west as Soho. Because Big John Filmore's bone-breaking heyday had been during World War II, fools asserted that he had mellowed, wasn't half as bad as some people made out.

And then there was Mad Mike Legrange. He'd started as a rumor and a bit of a joke: some crazy kid who would do anything on a dare. The nickname and the tales made it easy for Filmore to dismiss Mike Legrange. By the time he caught on that the most bizarre reports of Mad Mike's exploits were pale versions of violent reality, young Legrange was leader of what tabloid papers call a gang and working criminals refer to as a firm.

Mad Mike's firm was heavy on young, jobless tearaways who almost by definition, Had No Respect. Thus the firm was restless, expansionist, enterprising. Quite quickly it trod on Big John Filmore's sensitive toes. A betting shop was wrecked and robbed on Derby Day, a minicab office fire-bombed in retaliation.

Wise people battened down the hatches, proclaimed loud neutrality towards both factions, or embarked on extensive foreign holidays, according to income and temperament. Informed local opinion was that Mad Mike Legrange and his teenage crew were doomed. Big John had the manpower and experience; previous challengers had retired hurt. But it would be noisy and messy, no doubt.

Just before Detective-Constable Caradoc moved away, Harry North predicted: "It won't be as cut-and-dried as everybody says. You're educated, Dai. Cast your mind back to Hamlet—no madder than he wanted to be, and when he wanted. Legrange has got hold of *uncanny* amounts of money, since he started." Money impressed

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Harry North, probably because he never kept any. "Mark my words, Mad Mike has surprises for Big John. Remember, you heard it here first . . ."

That cryptic hint from master to apprentice was the seed of Inspector Caradoc's mild obsession with the war between the gangs. Marooned in staid suburbia, he had waited for the fighting to start. But for six months, nothing happened. He heard rumors and theories, when meeting former colleagues from Rosetta Street: Big John Filmore had bust his bottle, was too yellow for hostilities . . . unless there had been a summit conference, territory carved up and assigned . . . no, there was more to it than that, Big John had outsmarted Mad Mike. The kid was practically working for him, in exchange for token control of penny-ante activities . . .

Whatever the reason, it seemed to be a stalemate. Caradoc reasoned that Inspector North was right about Mad Mike's shrewdness. Evidently the kid was patient, content to grow stronger while his rival grew older.

Wrong, as it soon emerged. And now here was Doll O'Higgins, husky murmur drawing him closer, saying, *"I'll tell you what was going on . . ."*

Big John Filmore, she reminded the policeman, had long since given up "living above the shop." "Wouldn't even live in the Smoke any more, not him. Had this posh country house out Weybridge way, la-de-dah Surrey, on one of those private estates with rock stars and TV actors for neighbors."

One afternoon, home from a taxing round of golf, Filmore walked into the kitchen to find that his wife—a pretty ninny, half his age—was not alone. She was giggling and rolling her eyes at a skinny youngster who sat on the stripped-pine table, swinging his legs. He was wearing a denim suit, flowers embroidered on the jacket. His hair was crewcut at the front, girlishly long elsewhere.

Mrs. Filmore turned with a gasp as her husband's shoe squeaked from the abruptness of his halt in the doorway. She had the grace to look sheepish. "Ooh, you scared me, Johnny. I was just telling your friend Michael he's the spitting image of David Bowie."

"Give or take a bit of eye-liner." Mad Mike Legrange smirked, winking at her and flipping a salute to Filmore. "Nice place you got here . . . Johnny."

"Out," said Filmore, and his wife scuttled away. Big John heeled the door shut behind her.

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Quite at ease, Mad Mike said, "Before you start shouting and swearing and that, this won't take a minute. I want you to see something." Deft as a conjuror, he produced a piece of paper and passed it to the other man.

Taken aback, Big John swallowed his rage and glanced at the thing. It was a bank statement, much of the data obliterated under streaks of typewriter correcting fluid. Puzzled, he saw that it dealt with accounts of a company called Luni Developments.

"That's me," Mad Mike said helpfully, "Luni, Loony, get it? I got a lot of companies, you buy 'em off the shelf for peanuts, to shuffle your gelt around. Well, you got to, these days. . . . The important bit is by your thumb. Yesterday's date, fifty thousand quid drawn in cash. They made a fuss, young chap like me walking around with fifty grand in a briefcase, might get mugged." He laughed blithely, though the narrow, near-colorless eyes were alert.

Big John, face set like concrete, wondering what the hell this was about, commented, "They were right to worry, the bank. You're not going to live long, way you carry on."

"We'll see." Mad Mike stilled his legs. "I'm showing you that to prove that I am not telling lies. Yesterday I had fifty grand, today somebody else has it. An investment in personal security, you might say.

"This is how it works, Johnny—I've taken out a contract on you. Anything happens to me, and I do mean anything, car accident, heart attack, God strikes me down with a bolt of lightning, then you are dead."

Mad Mike smiled almost shyly. "Now you'll say if I am dead I'll never know that you are too. I don't believe in the afterlife, dead is dead, out go the lights, end of story. So I shan't gloat when the shooter blows your silly old head off. Put it down to spite, Johnny. My nature. I cannot bear anyone getting the better of me. As for a fat-gutted, smug back-number like your good self, well, it just isn't on. Totally unacceptable."

Big John spoke slowly, close to reverence. "You really are mad." He looked at the bank statement again. Denying his threat of only a moment before, he blustered, "Who's going to kill a nobody like you?"

"Good question." Mad Mike giggled, hugging his knees. "All I've done is speed things up, cut the preliminary bouts. Okay, you're fat and lazy and had things easy for too long. But eventually you'll stir yourself, work yourself up to top me. Or get somebody to do it for

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you, more like." He shook his head pityingly. "Predictable, see.

"I'm here to say, forget it. Because if I go, then you go. I made it that simple, so you can understand." Mad Mike slid off the table. "There's room for us both. Not much for you, once I really get going, but enough—for an old-age pensioner."

"Too much money," Big John observed. He crumpled the bank statement and tossed it back. "You never paid nobody that much to see to me. It's a con."

"Famous last words. You get what you pay for, am I right? I got the best. And it costs, setting up a deal like this. Paperwork. If I am dead, how can I be sure the shooter will do his part? Contrary-wise, how can a dead man pay the shooter? So you need your paperwork. The money is in Switzerland. Like an escrow account, you wouldn't know about them. Meaning the shooter gets paid if and when the bank is satisfied that you and me are dead."

Studying Filmore, he said softly, "I think we've got ourselves a believer." Serious again, Mad Mike retrieved the ball of paper from the floor, thrusting it into his pocket. "Yes, it's a lot of money. Which ought to tell you how serious I mean this. Cheap at twice the price, mind: fifty grand now keeps you out of my hair forever."

Incredulous, trying to ignore the lump of ice in his gut, Big John stammered, "A bank, a bank wouldn't go along with . . . murder!"

"A Swiss bank? Grow up, business is business. Try listening when I talk, Johnny—paperwork, I said. The shooter doesn't turn up in Zurich and go, 'Hi, I'm the hit-man, shell out.' It will all be kosher, far as outsiders can tell. A bit like a tontine; you won't understand that, either. Fellers putting into a kitty, last one alive scoops the lot." Mad Mike checked his Rolex. "Well, you've been told. Places to go, people to see."

"Hang on, kid! This isn't right. I swear if anyone has a go at you, it will be none of my doing."

Mad Mike Legrange hissed with impatience. "There you go, not listening! It doesn't matter who has a go at me, anymore. Not my problem." He broke off, lost in thought, before adding, "Sometimes I dazzle myself . . . this is brilliant. *You have to protect me.* Think about it. From this day forward you'd better pray I stay healthy. You'll be working for me, good as—anyone so much as looks at me nasty, you have to fix them. My bodyguard. It's brilliant."

"But it wasn't brilliant," Inspector Caradoc objected. "Filmore didn't buy the story, not after he thought things over."

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Doll O'Higgins gestured wearily, hardly more than a lift of an eyebrow, and he held the water glass for her. The fat plastic straw had a corrugated section allowing it to be bent towards her lips. This crimson tube, bright as blood, was the most vivid thing in the roofless tent screening her bed. Replacing the glass, Caradoc asked, belatedly, "How do you know what went on between those two? Did Filmore's wife eavesdrop?"

"Not her. Painting her toenails or listening to rock records, more like. Mad Mike told his precious hit-man, and the hit-man told me."

Patience, Inspector Caradoc lectured himself, don't blow it by demanding the name, straight out. But he couldn't resist, "So you say," hoping the skeptical tone was not overdone.

Doll was on to him. "My race, my pace—I'm telling the story, Dai. As a matter of fact, Big John *did* believe it. That's why there was no more aggro, after the boy marked his card."

"Then why—" Caradoc fell silent, for without warning, the woman was asleep or unconscious. Breathing evenly, expression placid. He decided against pressing the call-button for a nurse.

So street legend was true, there had been a Big Contract. Big, costly . . . and futile, for his £50,000 had bought Mad Mike Legrange less than a year of life. Why had he paid so much when a killer could be bought for a thousand pounds, in certain London pubs?

Part of the Mad Mike approach, maybe. Big gestures to catch the Cockney imagination. Inspector North had been sure that Legrange was only as mad as he needed to be. Go along with that, and it was rational to pay top dollar, assuring the enemy that your—how did the Cold War jargon go?—your deterrent was credible. Longing for a cigarette, Caradoc nibbled a thumbnail instead. It had not been credible, that was the snag. Big John Filmore killed Mad Mike, or sent one of his heavies to do the job. Not a subtle assassination: somebody walked up to Legrange in a parking lot, pressed a sawn-off shotgun to the young gangster's head, and unleashed both barrels.

Bringing about, exactly as promised, Filmore's own death . . .

Wrong way round, the Inspector brooded. One expected Mad Mike to live up to his label by indulging in suicidal violence. John Filmore, ruthless yet essentially cautious, ought to have had more sense. Granted, Big John could have gambled that the Big Contract was a bluff—*he* wouldn't have spent fifty grand to achieve checkmate, for sure—but what a gamble! Why had Filmore, that prudent man, been so rash?

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"Who knows," Caradoc grumbled, out loud. And saw Doll's eyes open, surveying him with a trace of motherly mockery.

"First signs of madness, talking to yourself," she said, voice stronger. "I've had such a nice little rest, Dai. Where was we?"

"Legrange marked Big John's card, explained about the Big Contract," he prompted.

Going off at a tangent, so that the listener feared that she was rambling, Doll said, "It puts me in mind of fairy tales. My Gran was Irish, she was full of stories about people making curses come true, by trying to wriggle out of them. F'rinstance . . . There was a king, and it was foretold that he'd lose his kingdom if his daughter got wed. So when she ran away and married, he tricked her and her hubby into coming back, promised that he wouldn't harm them. Only he went and chopped their heads off, rotten sod. To cheat fate, see. But all the other kings in Ireland got the right needle because he'd done his daughter wrong. So they chopped *his* head off . . . he was the one made the curse come true."

"I'm not with you, luv."

"Mad Mike thought himself so clever, putting that fifty thousand quid axe over Johnny Filmore's head. But he forgot about the shooter." Doll moistened her lips. "A lot of money for a bloke who needed it. Forty-seven grand was the fee, the rest went on setting it up, abroad. Forty-seven thousand, and no tax on it."

Again the paper-rustling laugh, humorless this time. "Mad Mike *was* clever, same as my Harry always reckoned. That money was in cold storage, like, but he still had the use of it. Working for him day and night. The only chance for the shooter to earn it, was if Mad Mike got the chop. The feller Mike picked was desperate. One good payday would set him straight, all debts paid and a nice whack left over for spending.

"But Mike Legrange had to go, for the shooter to collect. . . ."

A chilly bead rolled down Caradoc's spine; possibly a drop of sweat. Suddenly Doll's talk of curses fulfilled by efforts to defeat them was relevant. "The same man killed Legrange and then Filmore—it was all for the money," he said.

That had never been considered at the time. Mad Mike Legrange blown away without finesse, the roughly adapted shotgun left in a stolen car abandoned near the crime scene. John Filmore despatched with surgical precision and a single bullet from a sniper's rifle. Big John and associates spent forty-eight hours or more "helping the police with enquiries" before release for lack of evidence. Filmore

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drove home to Surrey, showered, napped, took a look at his garden—and met that single bullet, fired from a railway footbridge some eight hundred yards away.

One kingpin from each faction, eliminated in different styles—no wonder the CID had gone looking for a brace of assassins. Investigations were further confused by the aftershocks: Mad Mike's tearaways wanted vengeance and believed they knew where to seek it, Big John's army shared that conviction when their master was killed. Three more murders resulted, before Mad Mike Legrange's troops gave up, dispersing to safer areas of London.

There had been many arrests, but not for the original slayings. And all the while, Doll O'Higgins had been the watcher who saw most of the game. Reading his face, she whispered, "Go on, spit it out. I'm a right wicked cow. I don't regret nothing, Dai. Mad Mike and Johnny was two sides of the same coin. Rubbish, scum, better off dead."

"That makes it all right, I suppose. They were better off dead, indeed! And your fancy man with the gun was better off, full stop." But she had been with so many men in her time . . . "Waste of breath, I expect, but just out of interest, who was he, Doll?"

"Somebody worth ten of you."

"Goes without saying." Caradoc grinned savagely. "Lovely feller, murders for hire. Did you get a dip in the gravy? Couple of grand for keeping your trap shut?"

"Nobody got the money. He never made it to Switzerland, rest his soul. You know what happened. One minute driving his motor, the next . . . Still, he died happy. Thinking he'd got everything straight. He was going to retire, new start, right away from here. We'd even chosen a house on the coast. I could do bed and breakfast for summer trippers, Harry meant to have a boat, hire out for fishing trips."

Inspector Caradoc heard his own voice: "Harry . . . North? Harry was Mad Mike's shooter?" Then he recovered. "I don't believe it."

"Believe what you like, it's true," Doll assured him, listlessly.

Rules be damned, Caradoc lighted a cigarette. "I don't believe it," he repeated, marshalling arguments to persuade himself. "Harry loved money, no question. But tying up with a nutter like young Legrange? He couldn't risk that."

"I said the self-same thing. Couldn't believe my ears, when Harry told me. 'Don't have any part of it,' I says, 'must be a trick, a trap. Say you kill Big John for him—then Legrange has a tame copper for life. He'll blackmail you.' Harry just laughed. 'You're not thinking

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straight,' he goes. 'I only get to do the job if Mad Mike is dead, remember.' "

Her head rolled on the pillow. "I still worried it was a trick of Mad Mike's. No, says Harry, he and the kid understood each other. Mad Mike told Harry what he planned to do. Painting Big John Filmore into a corner, he called it. He said he would only go through with it if Harry took the contract.

"Harry reckoned there was nothing to it. He'd killed blokes when he was a commando, and got paid for it. No difference in doing it again, in civilian clothes." Inspector Caradoc could hear his bygone mentor saying it . . .

Caradoc spoke to her dead lover, not Doll. "It was still murder."

"Didn't worry Harry. 'By rights, Big John ought to have been hanged, years back,' he says. 'We know things about him that can't be proved. I'd only be doing what the public executioner missed out on, back in the fifties. Not to worry, darlin', I could shoot that bastard and sleep like a baby afterwards.' "

"Did he have an equally good reason for topping Mike Legrange too, apart from the money?" Inspector Caradoc inquired sourly. He was contrite, as soon as the words were out. Doll O'Higgins had been tiring for the last few minutes, but he had been too absorbed to care.

She gave him a strange look. *You missed something,* warned a voice in Caradoc's mind.

"We were like kids, once I got used to the idea, let Harry talk me round. Like we'd won on the football pools. Spending it, night after night. That's when we decided on Clacton and the boat and the bed and breakfasts. But time went on and time went on, and we twigged. It was never going to happen. Big John was scared, he'd knuckled under, just the way Mad Mike planned. And Harry, oh, he did need that money. His wife, the divorced one, was on his back. He was in arrears with her, and he'd borrowed a bit here and there, not from banks . . . So this one and that one was getting cheeky, taking liberties, and it was killing poor Harry. I mean, he was a bit wild, didn't care about regulations, but he did his job."

"That he did," Caradoc sighed. Adding, mentally, *After a fashion, and a bad one at that.* She could not or would not see that Detective-Inspector Harry North had graduated from a wild copper to a lethally bent one. "So good old Harry got sick of waiting and hurried things along."

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Doll's eyes blazed and her head left the pillows. "He was a good man. He was!" But then she subsided. "Isn't it funny? You coppers have that line of moody about owning up, you'll feel better for confessing. It's true, Dai."

"So they tell me. It was a long time ago, luv. Like you said, I can't do a thing about it. Harry's gone." He smiled tiredly. "Get some rest."

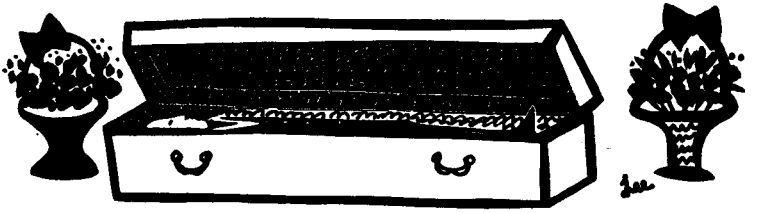
But her fingers, with no more weight than twigs brushing a passerby's skin, fumbled to keep him at her side. "Harry was a good man," she insisted. "Shame on you, thinking he would turn on a bloke that hired him. He was a rogue, but he played fair."

Caradoc, at a loss, sat down again.

Doll O'Higgins whined, "Don't be dense, you're supposed to be a detective. Harry never done it; Mad Mike getting shot was a gift from the gods, far as he was concerned."

He shivered at her quiet satisfaction, the radiance behind it. "Love a feller," Doll said, "and you can surprise yourself, how far you will go. I'd had that shotgun in the back room of the shop since Fergie died, my husband. He bought it for sport, rough shooting. My hands were blistered for ages, from hacksawing the barrels down. That was the hardest part. Firing the thing was a doddle. Stop looking like that, Mr. Copper—I'd have done a lot worse, for one bloke in the whole world."

Bloodless lips curved up at the corners as she drifted out of contact. "It wasn't murder . . . to me . . . just the least I could do for Harry."



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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Admirers of Sherlock Holmes have been writing serious, non-parodic imitations of the master almost since his debut over a century ago. But writers like Vincent Starrett, August Derleth, Stuart Palmer, and the Adrian Conan Doyle/John Dickson Carr team generally confined their pastiches to the short-story form. Novel-length Sherlock Holmes homages essentially emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, with movie novelizations like Ellery Queen's *A Study in Terror* (1966) and Michael and Mollie Hardwick's *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970) preceding Nicholas Meyer's bestsellers *The Seven Per-Cent Solution* (1974) and *The West End Horror* (1976). Since Meyer, the flow of ersatz Holmes—good, bad, and indifferent—has continued unabated.

Holmes pastiches fall into three general categories: 1) The straightforward, no-gimmicks pure detective novel with an original fictional cast in support of Holmes and Watson. The Canadian L.B. Greenwood, who debuted with *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Raleigh Legacy* (1986), is virtually alone in this category and (not coincidentally) does some of the best Holmes pastiches extant. 2) The "factional" Holmes novel in which real-life Victorian personalities make guest appearances and the great detective applies his skills to real historical mysteries. Meyer's novels, introducing such figures as Sigmund Freud and George Bernard Shaw to the Baker Street mix, are in this category, while Queen's novelization was the first of any number of pastiches setting Holmes on the trail of Jack the Ripper. Michael Hardwick's *Prisoner of the Devil* (1980) involved Holmes with the Dreyfus case, while Edmund Aubrey invokes literary license in *Sherlock Holmes in Dallas* (1980) to let him probe the Kennedy assassination. 3) The literary cross-pollination, in which Holmes becomes involved with fictional characters and situations out of other books. Some examples are Manly Wade Wellman and Wade Wellman's *Sherlock Holmes's War of the Worlds* (1975); Loren D. Estleman's *Sherlock Holmes vs. Dracula* (1978) and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Holmes* (1979); and Cay Van Ash's *Ten Years Beyond Baker Street* (1984), the latter involving Holmes with Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu.

The latest Holmes pastiche is in the last-named category. Asking the Baker Street sleuth to solve Charles Dickens's unfinished *Mystery of Edwin Drood* is such an obvious idea, someone had to attempt it eventually. A British historian and Dickens scholar has taken it on and done an admirable job.

*** Peter Rowland: *The Disappearance of Edwin Drood,* St. Martin's,

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$16.95. In 1894, a distraught John Jasper comes to 221B to consult Holmes on the mysterious disappearance of his nephew. Holmes and Watson go to the cathedral town of Cloisterham and discover how much mystery surrounds Jasper himself. Though there are some elements the detective story purist will look askance at (including a manifestation of another Dickens specialty, the Christmas ghost), this is one of the better Sherlockian pastiches. The characters of Holmes and Watson are well managed, and there is a measure of ironic humor in their discussion of the confusion of fiction and real-life. In one scene, Holmes is mistaken for a much less distinguished Baker Street sleuth, Sexton Blake.

*** Lia Matera: *A Hard Bargain,* Simon and Schuster, $19.00. As he leaves the house each morning, a husband places a loaded gun on the table in front of his suicidally-inclined wife. The initial question—when she dies, is it murder?—becomes much more complicated as the story goes on. Matera is a major mystery-writing talent, and her third novel about lawyer Laura Di Palma is a decidedly unconventional detective story, with much ambiguity of character and motive. It is not a complete success: some of the secondary characters seem too one-dimensional, and the two families (the husband's touchy/feely artistic, the wife's claustrophobically conventional middle-class) are so broadly drawn it's hard to decide which is more exasperating.

*** Anne Wingate: *Exception to Murder,* Walker, $19.95. The latest about Mark Shigata, former F.B.I. agent and now police chief of Bayport, Texas, is a lot of fun, a sort of Hardy Boys for adults involving murder and other malefactions at a religious theme park called ArkPark. One of Shigata's subordinates, Steve Hansen, who may be the only cop in fiction with a PhD in English, tries to apply the literary theory of Deconstruction to his detective work. Wingate, who also writes as Martha G. Webb and Lee Martin, has in common with the late Elizabeth Linington (a.k.a. Dell Shannon and Lesley Egan) the production of family-oriented police procedurals and the use of three names to do it.

*** William L. DeAndrea: *The Werewolf Murders,* Doubleday/Perfect Crime, $16.50. Philosopher-sleuth Niccolo Benedetti, who debuted in the author's Edgar-winning *The HOG Murders* (1979), has been a long time between cases. Here he travels to the Swiss Alps to investigate some murders at an international convention of scientists envisioned by the founding French baron as an Olympic Games of science. The murders, more superstitiously than scientifically, are being attributed to the lycanthrope of the title. Great Detective Benedetti is very much in the Nero Wolfe tradition, though he is more mobile and his Archie Goodwin character, private eye Ron Gentry, is married and does not narrate the stories. This

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is a solid novel in the Golden Age tradition.

*** Mary Higgins Clark: *All Around the Town*, Simon and Schuster, $22. Laurie Kenyon, who was abducted at age four and rescued at age six, has blocked out all memory of her captivity. At age 21, she is menaced again by her captors, now fronting a national TV ministry and fearful of exposure, and accused of the murder of a college professor. She is helped by her lawyer sister Sarah and both helped and hindered by the slate of multiple personalities she has developed to cope with her fears. Style, characterization, and dialogue that are all bestseller (or miniseries) simple have kept me from fully appreciating the novels of Mary Higgins Clark, but it's hard not to admire the intricate construction and cunning design of this one. The author knows how to keep the pages turning, wisely combining the pure suspense situation of an antagonist who is known (to the reader, that is) with a whodunit element. (Sharing the present book's stalker-out-of-the-past situation is the author's famous *Where are the Children?* <Pocket Books, $5.99>, the effective 1975 novel that propelled its author to bestsellerdom and presaged a whole sub-genre of children-in-jeopardy novels.)

In a commendable effort to prove they aren't really at each other's throats in mystery fiction's somewhat tiresome battle of the sexes, the Private Eye Writers of America and Sisters in Crime have joined forces in the anthology *Deadly Allies* (Doubleday/Perfect Crime, $18.50), co-edited by Robert J. Randisi and Marilyn Wallace. Since PWA doesn't restrict its ranks by gender, female contributors outnumber male twelve to eight. Most are well-known veterans, though newcomers Sarah Andrews and Jan Grape make a strong impression. Among the better tales are Jeremiah Healy's "Summary Judgment," a John Francis Cuddy novel-in-miniature; Sara Paretsky's "Strung Out," a V.I. Warshawski case with a background of the women's tennis tour; John Lutz's "Before You Leap," presenting Nudger in a fresh take on the familiar man-on-a-ledge situation; and Sandra Scoppettone's "Like Father, Like Daughter," a haunting non-series tale of a middle-aged woman seeking to understand the long-ago death of her mother. Other series characters on hand are Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, Benjamin M. Schutz's Leo Haggerty, Michael Collins's Dan Fortune, Max Allan Collins's comic-book sleuth Ms. Tree (seen here in a prose adventure), Robert J. Randisi's Nick Delvecchio (in a free-standing part of the novel *The Dead of Brooklyn* <1991>), Loren Estleman's Amos Walker, and Rob Kantner's Ben Perkins.

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WINNER OF THE 1991 SEMANA NEGRA SHORT STORY COMPETITION

Semana Negra, or "Black Week," a festival of crime workshops and films held each year in the port city of Gijon, Spain, draws mystery writers from all over the world for a celebration of crime fiction in all its forms and serious discussion of such topics as law, justice, and morality. One of the highlights of the event is the short story competition, entries for which must be submitted in the Spanish language. Last summer the prize for best short story went to American David Hall, a longtime resident of Spain. Mr. Hall has translated his winning story into his native language, enabling us to present it to you . . .

HE WHO WAITS FOR YOU

by DAVID C. HALL

You are standing in front of the dark window, as if looking out. A window should never be left like that at night. The blinds should be drawn or curtains closed. From out there in the dark they can see you, but you can't see them. You look out, but you don't see anything, nothing more than the dark on the other side of the glass and the murky reflection of the room on its surface.

I am sitting here in an armchair, not far from where you are, but I feel the distance between us. I have felt it many times, but I have never managed to understand it.

I could speak to you, but I know it wouldn't change anything. I did speak to you in fact, a few months ago. You gave no indication of having heard me. I muttered, it's true. I told you you ought to pull the curtains, that someone might see you. Maybe you didn't hear me.

There is nothing for me to do except wait. Eventually you will turn to me. I cross my legs. I contemplate the crease on my trousers,

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the shine on my brown shoes. I'm used to waiting.

Your face, when you turn, is pale. Your skin has always been pale, but now the light has gone out of it. It has gone slack and colorless. It occurs to me that maybe you have been putting on rouge for years, and only now, for the first time, you have forgotten to do it. That amuses me, in a sad sort of way. Your reddish blonde hair is still lovely. Perhaps there are streaks of grey in it, and you dye them. Hairdressers are very clever at that sort of thing these days, I understand. My barber has even offered to do it for me.

It doesn't matter. I have gone too far now to turn back just because you dye your hair or use cosmetics to restore the glow that your skin has lost. I will always remember your face as it was before you needed these things. I am constant, if nothing else.

"Who?" you ask finally, when I have almost forgotten what I said to you.

I make a vague gesture. I smile. You put your hands in the pockets of your long grey skirt. You are coming toward me now. Your expression is not particularly welcoming, but you are coming closer. The distance is going. I motion to the chair beside me. It is your chair actually, both of yours, his really, not mine to offer at all.

"Do you think they are watching me?" you say and stop there in the middle of the big living room, full of furniture and other things that you have picked out, accumulated in the course of the years. I was with you when you bought some of them. I don't know if you remember. I don't really know what you remember.

"I think you should draw the curtains," I say. I am calm and serious, since the situation calls for seriousness. You look at me. I nod. I smile again, an intimate, reassuring smile. You turn, you go back to the window and pull the cord that draws the curtain. I derive a certain satisfaction from that. You will obey me, you will recognize my right to decide things for you. It is nothing in itself really, no more than when you would accept without hesitation my choice of a table when we walked into a restaurant together. But now the stakes are higher. You don't know that, perhaps, but I know it. That is enough.

You sit down finally, leaning your head against the back of the chair. Your hand, on the arm of the chair, is not far from mine. I notice the nails are painted a bright red which is, I believe, the fashion this year. I could reach out my hand to cover yours. It would be a gesture of friendship, of sympathy. But no. It's too soon, there wouldn't be any point.

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"I suppose I should call the police," you say.

"You have to compose yourself."

I offer you my pack of cigarettes. You look at it and hesitate for a moment. I believe you almost smile when you take the cigarette. I lean toward you to light it, and I study your eyes that look down at the tip of the cigarette, the soft, vague curve your breasts make under the silk blouse. How many times have I done this? You lean back and slowly blow out the smoke. I like watching you smoke. It's a long time since you gave it up, and our best times were before that, I think. Nothing shows on my face of all of this, I am sure. I am cold, impassive. That is what they think of me. I know that. Now at least I can turn it to some use.

"Leave it to me," I say.

You look at me again with those pale eyes, which are not at all stupid, not easily fooled. You know me very well. I flinch, inwardly, I hope. You know me well enough to catch the significance of the flutter of an eyelid. I lift my glass. I remember my part. I am cool and responsible. I am a man. I know what has to be done.

"I know people who can handle this," I say. "Perhaps you should have some cognac."

You are no longer looking at me. You have gone down into your sorrow, your anxiety, and closed me out. But you accept the idea that I will take care of everything. You assume that I will serve you. It does not even occur to you to doubt it. I am, after all, your friend, your dearest friend.

"Call them," you say, without looking at me. Your face, which I see in profile, has assumed in sorrow some of the dignity of tragedy. It is a kind of loveliness I have never seen in you before. It frightens me a little, but then you have always been able to frighten me, all these years. There has always been something you could give, or take away.

"Not from here," I say.

That startles you, and with a look I let you know that it is possible that your phone is tapped and that I have thought about that, I understand this kind of thing. Don't think that I don't enjoy all this a little. Maybe in the end I am a bit of a clown. It never occurred to me until now.

"You have to understand," I say calmly, "that for one wrong move on our part they could kill him."

I wonder if you have realized that with all this your husband the second-rate politician is at last going to become famous, which I

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suppose has always been his ambition. And you too, although a little less so. Not me.

But you are not thinking about that, of course. You put your hands to your face, cover your eyes. Like all your gestures it is graceful, as if you had studied how to do it a long time ago, with the nuns.

"You have to realize," I say, in the same monotonous, patient voice, "that this is not going to be easy."

I didn't know that I was going to enjoy making you suffer. I should have known, but I never thought about it.

I drain my glass and set it down on the coaster on the table. Suddenly I feel shaken, as if in spite of all my plans I had made some terrible, unforeseeable mistake. I have always felt like this with you, even at the best times, when the night was finished and you left me with a brush of your lips over mine. I had always made some mistake. Or maybe it was always the same one: that I was not someone else.

You walk with me to the door. We do not kiss. I could hug you, show you a kind of friendly warmth, share your sorrow in a touch of your skin. Another man would. I stick to my role. I wait. There will be time.

You know I hate to drive, I hate the ugliness of the tollways with their urine-colored lights, gas stations and restaurants that serve fast, disgusting food. When I arrive I am tired and my throat is sore from too many cigarettes. It's late, and in the village there is that silence which is only to be found in villages at night, so quiet that you think there is nobody left still alive.

When I get out of the car I can smell the manure on the fields around. I take out the big iron key and unlock the wooden door. Inside it smells of stone and damp. I turn on the main switch and the lights on the ground floor. Something moves toward the back of the house, where old furniture and junk is stacked. A cat, I suppose. Mice make hardly any noise, rats, I don't know.

I open the door to the room and turn on the lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. He is still asleep where I left him, on the floor, tied, with a chloroform-soaked gag in his mouth. The room is full of the smell of chloroform, and when I take the gag off I can smell urine, because he has pissed himself. In his sleep, I suppose.

I wish you could see him now, I wish you could smell him. He was handsome in his day, I admit, and later he was distinguished, but he isn't now. He had enough intelligence to know what his masters

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wanted done, and to do it. Most of all—and I suppose that is what you liked about him—he had that masculine vitality that is so typical of second-rate politicians like him, always patting people on the back and putting their arms around others' shoulders. He put his arms around my shoulders enough times. You know that. He meant no harm. As far as I know he has never meant any harm to anyone. He has never needed to.

I slap him awake. When he sees me he tries to talk but only manages to slobber. His lips are numb from the chloroform. With his teary eyes and drooping lips there is something simian in his face that I have never seen there before. I take a couple of photos, closeups, just for myself.

Then I sit him up on the chair, put the white screen behind him so that the wall won't show up in the picture, and prop the newspaper against his chest. I take several shots, although all that matters is that he is recognizable and the newspaper headline legible, to establish the date. I know that this kind of thing is done this way. I follow the rules.

And also I have to admit that I like the idea that you will see him for the last time like this, in the photos, dirty and stupefied. He can almost speak now. He stammers. He begs me to tell him what's going on, to untie him. He's so simpleminded he still hasn't grasped what should really be obvious, that if I have let him see me it's because I am going to kill him.

It's a shame I'll never be able to tell you how stupid he looks now, drooling from the corners of his mouth, how stupid he really is, and always has been.

Perhaps some day when we are old, after many years together, I'll tell you about it, and we'll both have a good laugh.

No. I know I will never tell you about it. But it's nice to imagine, even if only for a moment.

He is beginning to understand, I think, however slowly. I can wait. It would be too cruel to let him die without understanding the reason. I have waited for you—how many years now? Fifteen? Twenty? I can wait a few minutes more.

People will be surprised that they have kidnapped, and then killed, a politician as insignificant as he is. But terrorism, as everyone knows, is irrational.

Q

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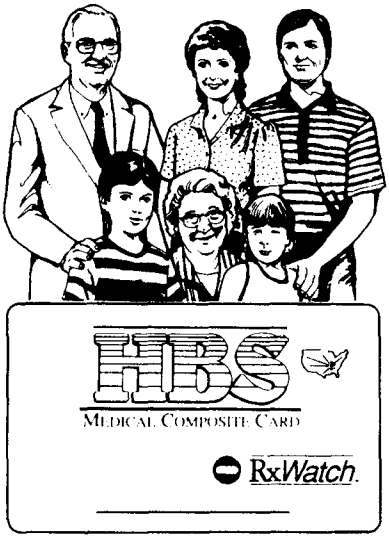

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a *NEW* Ben Snow story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Father Angeles pulled the books off the shelf and reached behind them, removing a flat box about the size of one of the volumes. "This was presented to me recently by a group of our Mexican converts. It is a golden cross, quite lovely to behold." He lifted the lid of the box, revealing the cross. Ben had little knowledge of the goldsmith's art, but he could see it was an object of skillful workmanship and great beauty. Delicate vines seemed to entwine across the gleaming surface of polished gold, catching and reflecting the light in a hundred different ways.

"Magnificent!" Ben whispered. "But why isn't it displayed in your church?"

"This is not a safe place, Ben. Already I hear the word has reached certain bandit gangs that ride up from the south. One in particular, a person known as Zanja, is said to covet it . . ."

THE TRAIL OF THE GOLDEN CROSS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

This was a very early adventure for Ben Snow, taking place in the New Mexico territory in 1882, when he was barely twenty-three years old. It followed by less than a year his visit to the mission church at San Bernardino in pursuit of the killer and bank robber named Poder.* Ben had found Poder at the mission and killed him in a gunfight. Somehow he'd also earned the friendship and respect of a mission priest named Father Angeles.

* *See "The Trail of the Bells" (*EQMM, *April, 1985).*

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Word had reached him that Father Angeles needed his help again, and so Ben had ridden out on his horse Oats, crossing the desert terrain as he had on the earlier journey to the mission of San Bernardino. His first sight of the distant bell tower brought an unexpected shiver of memory. He paused a moment and patted Oats's neck before riding on.

Father Angeles was a young man, perhaps around thirty, with blond hair and a fair complexion that took a beating under the desert sun. He and two other priests maintained the mission church with the help of some lay brothers, toiling among the Indians and Mexicans. He came out to meet Ben now, extending a hand in greeting. "Thank you for coming. I knew of no one else to ask."

"What's the trouble? Not another bank robber hiding out at the mission, I hope!"

"No, it's nothing like that." He thought for a moment and added, "Though in a way it is tied to Poder. Dead or alive, the man still haunts me."

Father Angeles led the way inside, where the thick mission walls offered some relief from the sun's heat. "You certainly have my interest," Ben told him.

The young priest went to the bookcase and paused with one hand on several volumes. "Do they still believe you are Billy the Kid?"

"Some do. I'm young and fast with a gun, and these days in the New Mexico Territory that's all it takes. There are people who don't believe he died last year."

"It is time for you to move on, much as I will miss your occasional visits."

"I suppose so," Ben agreed. "In Texas they probably never heard of Billy the Kid."

"Is that where you're headed?"

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "Why?"

Father Angeles pulled the books off the shelf and reached behind them, removing a flat box about the size of one of the volumes. "This was presented to me recently by a group of our Mexican converts. It is a golden cross, quite lovely to behold." He lifted the lid of the box, revealing the cross. Ben had little knowledge of the goldsmith's art, but he could see it was an object of skillful workmanship and great beauty. Delicate vines seemed to entwine across the gleaming surface of polished gold, catching and reflecting the light in a hundred different ways.

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"Magnificent!" Ben whispered. "But why isn't it displayed in your church?"

"This is not a safe place, Ben. The sight of such a treasure on display here might tempt some poor Mexicans or Indians to steal it. Already I hear the word has reached certain bandit gangs that ride up from the south. One in particular, a person known as Zanja, is said to covet it. He was a friend of Poder's."

"Is Zanja the man's name?"

"I assume so. But it's odd, a name ending in 'a' sounds like it should be a woman's."

"Mexican?"

"I don't know for sure. When I received word of the threat, I wrote to the bishop of our order immediately. I now have his response. He agrees that our mission is too remote to store or display such a treasure safely. He fears it will encourage violence and become a growing threat to our safety just by its presence here. I am to transport the cross to the Cathedral of Saint Francis at Santa Fe."

"That's a long ride overland, more than two hundred miles."

"Two hundred dangerous miles. I can trust no one but the priests here, and any of us traveling alone might be a target for this Zanja."

"What do you suggest?" Ben asked, but he already knew what the answer would be.

"Could you deliver it for us? I would trust you with this treasure, and you are able to defend yourself. If I sent you merely to guard one of us, you would have two people to worry about. Alone, unsuspected, you should make the journey without difficulty."

"I hate the idea of sleeping by a campfire with something this valuable in my possession."

"You don't have to," Father Angeles assured him. "If you leave in the morning you could make Elephant Butte by afternoon, and there's a stage through there every day."

"It seems to be the safest route," Ben agreed. He knew Oats could cover the trail to Elephant Butte in under two hours. "All right," he decided. "I'll do it for you, Father. I hope for both our sakes that you haven't made a big mistake entrusting it to me."

Before he departed on his journey, Ben Snow went up to the bell tower one more time. He wanted to gaze out again at the vast desert horizon, and feel the power that reached up to men in high towers. He stood there for some time, but all he could see was a lonesome Indian who seemed to be watching him from the mission garden.

* * *

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Ben reached Elephant Butte by noon the following day, carrying Father Angeles's golden cross in one of his saddlebags. When he left Oats at the local stable, he transferred the cross to a small carpetbag he would carry with him to Santa Fe.

"Goin' far, mister?" the stable owner asked. "I can sell you the stage ticket right here."

"Fine. One round trip to Santa Fe. How long will that take?"

The man shrugged and scratched the bristles on his chin. "Fifteen hours, if you got good drivers. You leave here at two, change horses every ten miles or so, and lay over tonight in Socorro. In the morning you get a new driver. You should be in Santa Fe by evening."

Ben paid his money and walked across the street to a little Mexican cantina to wait for the stagecoach. He was keeping a careful lookout for anyone who might have followed him into town, but he saw no one. By the time the stage pulled in, ten minutes late, only Ben and one other passenger were waiting to board it. This proved to be a young woman who wore a soft leather skirt and boots with a pale blue shirt. A broad-brimmed hat was held at the back of her neck by a braided cord around her throat and her dark hair was fastened somehow beneath the hat. She looked as if she'd be more at home on a horse than in a stagecoach.

The only through passenger was a man sleeping off a hangover inside the coach. The woman wrinkled her nose at the odor and chose to sit in the farthest corner. Ben sat opposite her, next to the sleeping man. "Now I know why they say the best seat on a stagecoach is the one next to the driver," she remarked.

He took that as an invitation to converse. "Don't they have someone riding shotgun?"

She shook her head. "Don't need it on this stretch. The Indians are under control and there's nothing worth robbing. You a stranger here?"

"Ben Snow," he said, extending a hand in greeting.

She hesitated, then shook it. "Martha Swain."

"How far you going?"

"Albuquerque. Visiting my folks there."

"I'm going on to Santa Fe." He squeezed the little carpetbag between his feet, to make certain it was still there.

"You're lucky it's not crowded. Last year when I made this trip some of the passengers had to ride on top."

"Do you live on a ranch?" he asked.

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Martha Swain shook her head. "I help my father run his feed-grain business. We're down here and my mother and brothers are up in Albuquerque. Crazy, isn't it?"

"Maybe your parents like it that way." He'd been trying to guess her age since she boarded the coach. Almost certainly she was older than Ben by a few years.

"Maybe they do," she agreed. Although the coach was under way and rocking from side to side, the motion didn't seem to bother her. She pulled the hat out from behind her head and placed it on the seat next to her.

"There's just you and your father? No husband?"

Martha Swain laughed softly. "How many times have I heard men ask that question? Are women that scarce west of the Mississippi?"

"Excuse me. I'm just making conversation."

"What about you?" She glanced down at his thigh. "You wear that pistol like a gunfighter."

"Not guilty. Out this way you have to be prepared, that's all."

The sleeping man stirred and suddenly came awake. "Where are we? Did I miss my stop?"

"Not unless you were getting off at Elephant Butte," Martha told him.

He stared at her and then shifted his gaze to Ben Snow. "Where you folks goin'?"

"Up north," Ben answered vaguely.

"Beyond Albuquerque?"

"A ways."

He grunted and closed his eyes again. Ben and the young woman were silent for a long time after that, not certain if he was asleep or awake. After a while the coach pulled into a station where six fresh horses were brought out. The reharnessing went quicker than Ben expected and they were on the road within minutes. The stopping and starting roused their fellow passenger again and he sat up straighter. "Where's this? Socorro?"

"No," Ben told him. "Just changing horses."

The sleeper introduced himself as Roderick Giles, a mining consultant. Ben could detect a slight British accent in his speech, though he tried hard to cover it up. "I'd better try to stay awake now," he said. "God, I must smell terrible! You'll have to excuse me."

"It happens to us all," Ben assured him.

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Giles squinted at him, then reached into his vest pocket to remove a pair of pince-nez glasses which he donned. "Are you a cowhand, Mr. Snow?"

"Mainly that, so far. I'm thinking of heading for Texas."

"You're traveling in the wrong direction."

This brought a soft chuckle from Martha Swain. "I was about to say the same thing."

They talked and bantered until the next change of horses, then spent some time admiring the scenery along the upper stretches of the Rio Grande. The river, never as great as its name except at flood stage, grew noticeably narrow and shallow as the stagecoach carried them north.

The carpetbag and its contents still rested between Ben's feet.

Socorro was a small town that had existed on the banks of the river as long as anyone could remember. It was perfectly located to serve travelers in need of a bed after a long day's journey by coach, and for this reason it sometimes attracted traders and itinerant entertainers. As Ben's stagecoach pulled in at dusk, a group of Mexican musicians was performing in front of the hotel, attracting little attention from the few passersby.

Roderick Giles was first off the coach, seeming completely sober now, and he offered his hand to help Martha alight. "These musicians are really quite good," he said.

The little band consisted of four musicians with horns and guitars, led by a tall slim man wearing a gold-braided jacket and a sombrero that shaded his face. He was playing a trumpet, but Ben could not share Giles's enthusiasm for the music. It sounded to him as if the musicians needed more practice together.

The hotel was little more than a series of cubicles with beds, a place for stagecoach passengers to rest overnight. Ben put his carpetbag on the bed and decided there was no way he could leave Father Angeles's cross inside. He removed it and slid it inside his belt at the small of his back, effectively hidden by his shirt and vest. Then he went outside to join the others.

Giles and Martha were seated at a table outside a cantina, drinking Mexican beer.

"Do you really like that?" Ben asked.

"It's the best they have," she answered with a shrug.

A short man dressed in a black suit like a banker or clergyman appeared from somewhere. "I've come for the morning stage to Santa Fe. Where do I sleep?"

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"In there," Ben told him. "Check with the ticket agent first."

"Thank you, sir! My name is Harvey Quirt. I'm on my way to see the territorial governor."

"Ben Snow. I'm riding to Santa Fe too."

"Good! I'll enjoy the company."

Martha and Giles hadn't bothered to introduce themselves, and as the small man hurried away she commented, "He doesn't look very exciting. We'll let you keep him company, Ben."

"What happened to the Mexican band?"

"They gave up," Roderick Giles told him. "No one was listening."

Martha got to her feet and stretched. "I think I'll turn in too, since the music has stopped. That stagecoach leaves at eight and I want to have breakfast first."

Ben took her seat for a few minutes, shifting on the chair so the golden cross didn't press into his back quite so painfully. "You were pretty much soused back in Elephant Butte," he told Giles.

"I hate traveling by stagecoach. It's some sort of motion sickness. I always have a few drinks to get started and I guess I overdid it this time."

"You said you're a mining consultant?"

"That's right. The future of the New Mexico Territory lies in copper and silver mining."

They talked a while longer before Giles went off to bed. Ben ordered one more Mexican beer. He was just finishing it when he noticed something odd down the street. Though the hour was late, three men were hurriedly saddling their horses in front of the stable. Ben walked quickly toward them, wondering what they were up to. He called out to the men, but that only seemed to frighten them. They spurred their horses and galloped off out of town. It took Ben just an instant to recognize them as the three musicians from the Mexican band. He called after them but they kept on riding.

Ben was about to head back to the hotel when he heard something like a groan from behind one of the buildings. He drew his gun and stepped into the shadows. By the lamplight from one of the windows he could make out the body of a man lying face down on the ground. Ben recognized him at once from his gold-braided jacket and sombrero, though the jacket was dirty now and its rear seam was split open. The man groaned again, softer this time, and Ben knelt in the dirt to turn him over.

"What happened?" he asked. "The others rode away. Did they do this to you?"

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The trumpet player clutched his side and Ben pushed away the jacket to see the bloodied shirt beneath it. He tore open the shirt, revealing a wide knife wound near the heart. "Who stabbed you?" Ben asked.

"I—Zanja."

"Zanja did this? He's here in Socorro?"

But the man gave a shudder and died there in Ben's arms. He carefully rested the body on the ground, running his fingers over the man's rough hands, staring at the weatherbeaten face. Had he recognized Zanja from some meeting in the past?

Ben stood up and hurried away, leaving the body where he'd found it. Back at his room he found that the carpetbag had been slit open with a knife and its contents searched. Zanja knew about the golden cross, perhaps from that watchful Indian back at the mission. Zanja was on his trail.

Martha Swain had already finished her meager breakfast by the time Ben left the hotel with his roughly patched suitcase the following morning. "Aren't you eating?" she asked.

"A cup of coffee will do me."

"We have another passenger."

"That Harvey Quirt from last night?"

"No, besides him. A Mexican named Jose something. He's already on the coach."

Ben saw Giles talking to the ticket agent and walked over to join him. "How soon will we be leaving?"

The agent took out a big pocket watch such as train conductors carried. It was just eight o'clock. "Well, I—" A tall skinny man with a droopy handlebar mustache, carrying saddlebags and a rifle, came strolling up to them. "You Cole Fosse?" the agent asked.

"That's me."

"Load up your passengers. You're due to pull out right now."

"Everyone on board!" Fosse bellowed. "This is the morning stage to Albuquerque and Santa Fe."

He climbed up in the driver's seat, stowing his saddlebags and rifle underfoot. Harvey Quirt came running out of the hotel, still wearing his black suit, and boarded the stage before Ben and Giles could reach it. Martha came along behind.

Although stagecoach interiors were wide enough to accommodate three medium-sized passengers on each of the two seats, it was readily apparent that the Mexican named Jose would need two

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spaces. He was fat and old and not about to be moved. Ben sat next to him, but it was obvious that Martha was uncomfortable squeezed in between Harvey Quirt and Giles.

"I'll ride up with the driver," Giles quickly volunteered. "It's a smoother ride for me anyway." He climbed out and called up to the driver. "We're a bit cramped. Can I ride up with you?"

Fosse glanced down at him. "Can you handle a rifle if need be?"

"Sure can!"

"Climb up, then. I'll be glad to have the company."

The coach started off with a jerk that threw the passengers forward, but as soon as it was underway the ride smoothed out a bit, settling into the familiar swaying motion. The Mexican named Jose seemed to take on the role that Roderick Giles had during the first leg of the journey. He wasn't drunk or sleeping, but apparently he understood virtually no English, and his age and size made even motion difficult. After he'd answered Ben's questions with assorted grunts and Spanish phrases, Ben gave up the attempt and directed his remarks to little Harvey Quirt.

"Did you arrive in time to see the Mexican band last night?"

Quirt jerked his head up, as if surprised to be addressed by Ben. "Ah, no. They were playing as I rode into town, but they stopped at about that time."

"How did you get there—on horseback?"

"A friend drove me to Socorro on his buckboard."

All had been relatively quiet when they left town, and it seemed likely that the trumpet player's body had not yet been found. Ben thought about that. Somehow the man had recognized Zanja and been killed, before or after Zanja had searched Ben's room and sliced open his carpetbag. Zanja knew he was carrying the golden cross, but he hadn't found it yet. That was keeping Ben alive. But the killer wouldn't allow him to reach Santa Fe with the cross. He'd follow along and make another try.

If he wasn't on the stagecoach already.

Four hours later they still hadn't reached Albuquerque, but when they stopped to change horses the driver announced there'd be a half-hour stop for anyone who wanted food or drink. They all left the coach—even the old Mexican—to stretch their legs and look around.

"Where are we?" Martha Swain asked.

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Ben Snow scanned the horizon, looking for familiar landmarks. "Near Belen," he decided finally, "about thirty miles out of Albuquerque."

"That's another three hours!"

"Maybe less. He's been traveling at a good speed."

Roderick Giles came over to join them. "You get a great view from up there. And it doesn't seem to rock quite so much."

"Did you see any Indians to shoot at?" Martha chided him.

"It's always a possibility," Ben told her seriously. "One last band of Apache raiders, led by Geronimo, is still on the loose in the territory."

The old Mexican named Jose muttered something which Harvey Quirt promptly translated. "He says Geronimo is in Mexico."

Ben shrugged. "That could be. He sometimes flees there when the army is after him. He's supposed to be on a reservation at San Carlos." He had another thought. "Ask Jose if he ever heard of someone called Zanja."

Quirt seemed puzzled for just an instant. "Zanja? Why that's—"

"A Mexican bandit, isn't he?" Giles said. "Seems I've heard the name. Come on, let's get a drink here. I could use a shot of whiskey after all that riding."

Jose seemed willing to join them, and Ben helped him inside. "Thank you," the old man said, managing some English.

Ben seated him at a table and returned with some beer. He decided to pursue his knowledge of English. "Zanja? Do you know Zanja?"

Jose stared at him blankly, then said, *"Agua."*

"Water?" Ben repeated in English. He knew only a few words of basic Spanish, but *agua* was one of them.

The old man said no more, becoming more interested in the beer Ben had brought him. Presently Martha came over to their table. "How are you two getting along?" she asked.

"I thought I could get him to speak English. He seems to know a few words."

"Quirt can translate for you. He's a smart fellow. Knows French, too, from when he was with the State Department in Washington."

The stage driver, Fosse, appeared in the doorway. "Everyone on board! We pull out in five minutes."

The afternoon leg of the journey seemed to pass more quickly, possibly because the fresh team of horses was more vigorous, pulling the stagecoach at close to fifteen miles an hour. The road here was

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smoother too, along the upper reaches of the Rio Grande as they approached Albuquerque. Jose slept most of the way, and Harvey Quirt produced a book of Sherman's memoirs. Not being much of a reader, Ben fell into conversation with Martha Swain.

"You never really answered my question about a husband," he said.

She chuckled. "There's no husband and you're far too young for me, in case you've got ideas. I'm thirty years old."

"You don't look it."

"I try not to. Living out in this bleak country, helping to run my dad's feed business, I sometimes wonder if it's worth the trouble. The only men I meet are more interested in gold than in any lasting relationships with women."

Ben thought of the golden cross, still nestled against his backbone. "I imagine there are a great many gold thieves around. That name I mentioned earlier—Zanja—is supposed to be one." From the corner of his eye he saw Harvey Quirt stir, but he seemed to keep on reading his book.

"I've never heard the name before," she said.

They changed horses only once before reaching Albuquerque, and arrived there by mid-afternoon. Ben had visited the place before but it still impressed him. It was growing all the time, and the coming of the railroad two years earlier could only increase that growth. Already a whole new town was being laid out to the east of the original Albuquerque, linking up with the new railroad. The stagecoach office was now in a plaza near the station.

"Half-hour rest stop," Cole Fosse announced, jumping down from the driver's seat. "Santa Fe next stop." Giles climbed down from his seat and then went off to the ticket agent's building.

"I'll be leaving you here," Martha Swain told Ben. "I hope you enjoy the rest of your journey."

"The others won't be half as charming as you."

"I'm sure you'll get some new passengers here."

The old Mexican left the coach, getting a helping hand from Harvey Quirt. "I think I'll stay on board," Quirt told them. "I'd like to finish this book before we reach Santa Fe."

Ben said goodbye to Martha and strolled around the plaza before going back to the waiting room. Fosse was in the midst of an argument with the stationmaster about his pay, while Giles and Jose sat quietly to one side. "What do you mean you can't pay me?" the driver argued. "I've got a note from Carmody saying I'm taking his place."

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"The payroll's made up at the main office in Kansas City," the stationmaster explained. "Your deal's with Carmody so he pays you. That's the way we do it at Coach Line."

"What about the—?"

Fosse's intended question was interrupted by a sudden scream. Ben was certain it came from Martha Swain. He was first out the door, with the others close behind. It was Martha, all right. She stood by the open door of the stagecoach, frozen in fright. Ben moved her aside and saw Harvey Quirt's little body toppled sideways on the seat. This time the killer had left the knife in the wound.

When the sheriff arrived to question them all, Martha resigned herself to a further delay. "I should have just kept going," she told Ben. "I got a few blocks away and realized I'd left my traveling bag on the coach. I came back and opened the door and he was there like that."

"You saw no one near the coach as you approached?"

She shook her head. "No one."

He was remembering Quirt's reaction when he'd mentioned the name Zanja. It meant something to the little man, and that knowledge had brought about his death. Two men dead now, but he was the one Zanja really trailed. The others had merely been in the way.

Because the sheriff could think of no other possibility, guilt was soon assigned to a lone bandit, sneaking through the plaza, intent on robbing the stagecoach before he realized there was someone inside. Ben figured it wasn't his job to correct the sheriff.

When they were finally ready to go, Martha Swain was still there. Now she was saying goodbye, but first there was the matter of the dead man's traveling bag. Ben pulled it out of the stagecoach and opened it to place the Sherman book inside. He noticed two other small books near the top, Spanish and French dictionaries. Martha had been right about his knowledge of languages.

He remembered the first body, the trumpet player back in Elephant Butte. He'd named the killer as he died, and Ben had left him there with his jacket split up the—

The trumpet player had known his killer, but that was not why he died. Quirt had known the killer too, or at least the identity of the person called Zanja.

Ben stared down at the little dictionaries in his hands and flipped one of them open. He already knew what he was going to find.

Zanja, Zanja . . .

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"I'll help you with those," a voice behind him said.

He heard the roar of a six-gun and felt the blow to the small of his back in the same instant. He went down as if hit by a sledge hammer, but he twisted as he fell and had his revolver free by the time his body hit the dust. Some swore they had never seen a faster draw from a wounded man, but then Ben Snow wasn't wounded. The golden cross had saved his life by deflecting the bullet.

Zanja wasn't so lucky. He died standing up, before he could get off a second shot. It was the stagecoach driver, Cole Fosse.

Ben started by telling the sheriff and the others about finding the body back in Elephant Butte. "I immediately jumped to a wrong conclusion," he said. "The man was wearing the trumpet player's gold-embroidered jacket and hat, so I immediately assumed that's who he was. I'd never gotten a good look at the trumpet player's face because the big sombrero shaded it. But there were at least three things about the body that should have told me at once it wasn't the trumpet player from that Mexican band."

"Do you want a beer?" Giles called from the bar.

"Don't mind if I do. All this talking makes me thirsty. I said there were three things about the body I should have noticed. The jacket was split up the back because it had been forced onto a larger man. The stab wound itself was not visible until I opened the dead man's shirt, showing that he hadn't been wearing that shirt when he was stabbed. Third, his hands were rough and his face weatherbeaten. They were not the hands of a musician. They were the hands of someone used to holding tight reins—the hands of a stagecoach driver."

"That's guessing," the sheriff argued. "Maybe he only played the trumpet part of the time."

"True, but even without that it was not the trumpet player's body. I asked myself who would kill him and change clothes with him? Who would have the clothes available? Not the three who rode away, because they dressed differently. Only the trumpet player himself would have the jacket and hat. Only he could have been the killer. The other three rode away because they were frightened, not because their leader had been killed but because he'd killed someone else. The victim died with the name Zanja on his lips, and since I already knew he was after this golden cross, we come to a logical conclusion. Zanja killed the man in the alley and switched places with him so he could join me on the stage to Santa Fe."

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"The victim was the real stagecoach driver?" Giles asked, bringing the beers.

"Exactly. Apparently he was a man named Carmody. Fosse forged a note from him, claiming illness, and had it delivered to the station at Elephant Butte. Then he showed up as the promised replacement. I was present at the time, and the stationmaster asked if he was Fosse. Obviously he didn't know him. Remember the jerky start as we pulled out of Elephant Butte? Fosse wasn't that used to driving a stage."

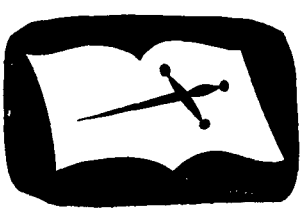
"Why couldn't Zanja have been any of us?" Martha inquired.

"Because the trumpet player, when I saw him performing, was tall and thin. You and Giles were with me at the time, so you were both automatically eliminated. Quirt was a little man and Jose is a fat man. Neither one came anywhere near the proper size. Fosse, the stage driver, did. He was tall and skinny. The droopy mustache was a fake, of course."

"Why did he kill Quirt?" the sheriff wanted to know.

"Because the poor man knew his languages too well. When he first heard the name Zanja he started to say something. Later, alone in the coach, he must have confronted Fosse with it. He got a knife in the heart for his boldness. Just now, when Fosse saw me glancing through those foreign dictionaries, he knew he had to kill me too, even before he'd located the golden cross. You see, *Zanja* is simply the Spanish word for ditch. *Fosse* is the French word for ditch. When Fosse started on a life of crime, he simply chose the Spanish equivalent of his own name. He was unlucky enough to encounter someone like Quirt who knew both Spanish and French and made the connection. I never would have, without help from those dictionaries, though I should have had a hint when I spoke the word for ditch to Jose and he replied with the word for water."

The following day, Ben Snow delivered the golden cross to the Cathedral of Saint Francis in Santa Fe. The bishop ran his finger over the gouge in the back of the cross, but he didn't inquire as to how it had happened.



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"Boredom and burnout would never be a problem for Dr. Cantor, because to him there was nothing better in the field of medicine, jobwise, than forensic pathology." And it seems there may be few fields better suited for a little sleuthing, though mystery writers have not often chosen a forensic pathologist for their chief detective. Perhaps this is because we do not easily empathize with one whose days are spent in the morgue. The more credit then to E. S. Russell for creating in forensic pathologist Ivan Cantor a very human detective whom readers will want to see again. . . .

BLIND JUSTICE

by E. S. RUSSELL

When you had nothing to look forward to at the end of a long day but a microwave dinner for one in the one-room apartment you called home, and not even a cat or a dog to welcome you in, and when you were too tired to go home anyway, you had another cup of coffee in the lunchroom. Maybe with one of the office girls, if you were lucky. So Dr. Ivan Cantor went hopefully down the long hall.

He almost turned back to the peace and quiet of his office, because Doctors Dave Ferreira and Al Street were heading in the same direction, their continuing argument filling the hall and enveloping him like smoke.

Fenway Park wouldn't be big enough for those two, he thought, half in wonderment, half in exasperation. Their noise has a way of expanding to fill the space available—and then some. What it does to the acoustics here drives me totally up the wall.

As he helped himself to coffee, he enlarged his complaint. Take the autopsy room, he told himself. The autopsy room's three times bigger than this one, but when those mouths get going, a person can't hear himself think. Someday the dead'll stick their heads out of their shrouds and say, "Hey, you guys, come *on,* how's about a little consider*ray*tion!" And will I get shook? Nah.

And he wouldn't. A forensic pathologist stopped getting all that shook after four years of shootings, stabbings, poisonings, suicides,

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beatings, ODs, hit-and-runs, stranglings, drownings, dismemberments, mummification, decomposition, and kitchen-table abortions, never mind cardiac arrest from every kind of natural cause. You saw so much death and so much of the underworld in such a controlled environment that eventually the unusual became the usual and you tended to dull down in the shock and wonder department.

Sometimes an anthropologist came in with bones discovered by a work crew laying pipe, and you had to say whether they'd bagged an animal or a human, and if the latter, its race, sex, age, and cause of death. Since the anthropologist was hoping for an Indian burial ground and the water department was hoping for a homicide, the whole thing made a nice change.

Occasionally you examined a perfectly healthy-looking young adult, no lesions, no disease, nothing fishy in any of the internal organs, absolutely nothing to show *why* the individual was dead—or rather why they were lying around *dead* when they looked in good enough shape to be doing something more meaningful—and this too was great, puzzlewise.

Basically, though, the extraordinary was pretty much the usual around here, and there were enough ho-hum days to give a guy a restful change of pace.

But boredom and burnout would never be a problem for Dr. Cantor, because to him there was nothing better in the field of medicine, jobwise, than forensic pathology. Not that it wasn't tiring, especially when the interminable contention—this late afternoon's topic the pros and cons of organ transplants—between Dave Ferreira and Al Street filled the air like Musak that you couldn't shoot, stab, strangle, or dismember.

Sighing, Dr. Cantor nestled deeply into his chair, his fleshy back and buttocks cushion enough against the molded plastic yellow shell—"Goes good with my apple-green tunic"—and tilted back against the butter-yellow wall. Colorwise they sure didn't stint on this place, he thought gratefully, remembering the battleship-grey and poison-green paint of other state buildings in which he had studied and worked.

Still, he sighed. More sensible to force himself to his feet, go back to his office, struggle ("Gotta really start workin' out again") out of tunic and into sweatshirt, and go home and lie down and rest. But he stayed where he was, enjoying the fragrant steam curling out of his coffee and beaming commands to the mug to rise of itself to his lips.

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Anyway, having been here a scant two months, he was curious to know why Dave Ferreira, a permanently and passionately cranky man, was in favor of transplants and the usually generous-hearted, sweet-tempered Al Street was opposed. He also wondered why they bothered talking to each other at all, when their mutual dislike was so obvious.

Ah, symbiosis, that's what it is. They need each other. Sure makes weird bedfellows, symbiosis, Dr. Cantor thought, reaching for philosophic serenity as he watched the two come in. He stroked the Groucho Marx moustache that screened his sensitive lips, and sighed again.

Dave Ferreira was saying, "—remember last year when you—"

Al Street smiled tiredly. "Whaddyuh say, Grouch."

Dr. Cantor lifted a limp hand in greeting.

Dave Ferreira ignored him and continued without a pause. "—had some chest pain. Okay, so it really was heartburn, so you're lucky. But suppose it's the real thing, and here you are, forty-four, three kids, and a wife with a big-time talent. You telling me you'd turn down the chance to live maybe five more years because it's against your principles"—slopping coffee as he filled his mug with a shaking hand—"or that the quality of what's left of your life is good enough, and as for Sally, what the hell, Sally's a mere chattel and doesn't matter enough to bother about?"

"Here, you slob," Al said, thrusting a paper towel at him. "You're not improving anybody's quality of life by messing up the place. For once wipe up after yourself. Okay, so tell me where's the quality. First of all, I'd have to live with part of somebody else living inside of me. And not just living—a kidney, a liver—but moving. Beating. Making a noise. It's repulsive, it's obscene. It's like a—a—I don't know, like some grotesque form of pregnancy. And don't even think of all the medicine, the tests, the constant daily monitoring, the whole nine yards of aftercare I'd have to do for a measly five more years—if that. I wouldn't wish it on anybody."

Ignoring the towel and the spilt coffee, Dave Ferreira spooned sugar into his mug and sat down. "Your analogy stinks."

"So it stinks. Sorry to offend your literary standards and requirements but I knoweth not a more felicitous way to phrase it. Jesus!" Al Street sighed gustily, and considered another way. "All right. Ever picture yourself having cancer? Something foreign, alien, a greedy clever bastard of a parasite worse than the worst tapeworm,

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something that's feeding on you so as to live, that's snacking on your sweetbreads—"

Nah, Dr. Cantor thought, but his lips trembled unseen.

Ferreira slammed down his mug, and coffee splattered on the tabletop. "What's that got to do with the subject! Look, buddy, life's a matter of choices and compromises, and most of 'em stink. Most everything stinks, and anybody with any sense keeps his back to the wall. What the hell's the matter with your sense of perspective! You wouldn't care enough about your family—about, about *her*—to try and control your little sensitivities?"

"What the hell's the matter with *you?* Why don't you go practice family medicine awhile? Better yet, pediatrics. You've been in the morgue too long. You've forgotten that death's a part of life. You've forgotten that the human body isn't a collection of replaceable parts like a car or a washing machine, it's a marvelous construction that's subject to various kinds of breakdowns, some of which we can't avoid and we can't fix.

"And we shouldn't try, not beyond a certain point, or it's a real smack in the head to God, you know—any god. (Dr. Cantor nodded agreement.) What you're saying is, 'Hey, Big Fella, You didn't design us all that good, so we're gonna show You, with our big new shiny ever-inventive inexhaustible technology, just how it's done, so sit up 'n take notes 'cause there's gonna be a quiz later.' "

"Religion's crap, pal. Demonstrably so. I learned that at my mommy dearest's knee, which is why I'm a pragmatist and a realist, and basically out for Number One, which is *moi.* So let's drop the philosophy and psychology a minute, why don't you, and tell me this. How's Sally really doing?"

Al Street ran a fingertip around the edge of his coffee mug, making a tiny squeak, and now it was his hand that shook. "Not great," he said at last.

"So what are you gonna do about it?"

"Whaddyuh mean, what'm I gonna do about it! I'm doing what I can do."

"Which is?"

Al Street shrugged. "Topical drops. Rest. And the doctor's holding the perfs as long as he can with Super glue, would you believe! Super glue from the hardware store! . . . And the kids help, of course."

"How nice. How sweet you all are. And while Sally's stuck together with glue and *resting* and you're heating up a can of hash, what happens to her career?"

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"She's patient. She knows it's on hold."

"Really. The quality of life for a painter who can't see too good—and not for much longer, either—must be pretty goddam lousy, wouldn't you say? Or do you make it up to her with philosophy?"

"What's with your wife's eyes, Al?" Dr. Cantor said hesitantly, but needing to know.

Ferreira answered, furiously. "Keratoconus. Keratoconus, I ask you! Can you beat that, for crissake!"

Appalled, Dr. Cantor saw in his mind's eye the corneas growing more and more cone-shaped and then perforating until— "But corneal transplants—" he said with sturdy optimism.

"You kidding? It's against his *principles!*" Ferreira exploded. "This bleeding heart agonizes over the starving diseased millions in Asia and Africa. Wait'll you hear him on that subject! He sends money for the victims of drought and famine in Chad and Ethiopia and every place else. Sally had to go down on her knees—didn't know I knew about that, didja!—she had to *beg* him to give up the idea of going doctoring for a few years in the Sahel. But right under his nose is a problem with a solution he won't touch 'cause it goes against his *principles!* I'd like to ram those principles up your nose, Al. That great lady a painter—and it hurts like hell just to open and close her eyes! If she were *my* wife, there's nothing I wouldn't do to help her! Nothing!"

"I'm sorry, Al," Dr. Cantor said softly. "I didn't know."

Al Street slumped over the table and massaged his forehead. "Yeah, well . . . thanks, Iv."

"Did you at least contact the eye bank, you stupid bastard?" Ferreira said savagely.

Al Street looked up, his eyes red and swollen with unshed tears. "I didn't have to. The doctor properly got Sally's permission and *he* called, so as to spare my sensitive nature. And here's a few more things you don't know, you arrogant swine. There aren't many corneas available at the best of times, there's a serious shortage now, *real* serious, which is surprising for an urban area like Boston, the waiting time's six months at least, and Sally's not high enough up on the list to get any before it's—before it's too late. If her doctor were one of those guys who does two hundred transplants a year and happens to be on the eye bank board, it'd be a different story. But what are you gonna do? It's politics before principles in medicine as everywhere else. Which is something I don't guess *you* have any

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quarrel with, do you, you son of a bitch. And spare me the suggestion that she see one of the big guns. That's been tried too—and they're all too busy. And don't even *think* about what if I worked in Emergency and they brought in somebody who was almost out of time and could meet all the requirements *and* the family agreed to donate his corneas. The eye bank tech with his trephine and his methiolate and his goddam list'd be there before you could say 'knife'!" He stood up suddenly, his chair clattering on the floor. "Well. Time to go open a can of hash. My wife happens to like hash, silly old her."

They heard his rapid footsteps down the hall until he was gone and they couldn't hear anything any more.

Dr. Cantor rose. "Well, uh, see you tomorrow, Dave. Have a good one," he said, wasting a courtesy, and left Dave Ferreira doodling with a fingertip in the coffee he had spilled.

Time flowed by, the morgue variously tenanted by bodies of every race, every age, every religion, profession, and sexual preference, and once possessed of, or driven by, every fantasy, every dream, every virtue, every fault. Death, the ultimate democrat, dispensed the same justice to all and headed the only true OEO, hiring all comers for the identical job of turning to dust and ashes.

Thus the philosophy that armored Dr. Cantor against the tension and horror of the days. He never shared it. To his colleagues, and even the office staff, black humor was the best defense—not that he didn't laugh nor they reflect. And there was always the paperwork, which was to shock what water was to fire—not that their effect could ever be totally eradicated.

Now and then, and indeed more frequently of late, he thought about the beneficial aspects of love and marriage, provided he could find a nice girl who didn't equate a medical cop with a butcher or a pig.

And there was always silence, in which you could hide and maybe heal.

Provided Doctors Ferreira and Street either shut up for five minutes or were, both or singly, out for half a day at least. A murder case needing an M.E.'s expert testimony was always good for the latter, and what with the transplant argument that was continuing unresolved, Dr. Cantor did not apologize to God for wishing that a complicated murder case featuring an obscure, equivocal cause of death would come into court and give him a break.

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He was combing the newspaper for possibilities one day when he heard an argument, audible enough in its harshly whispered urgency, outside his half-open office door.

Them again! he thought, and sat back, concentration broken, hope temporarily shattered, waiting until they removed themselves and their bone of contention—

No, dammit! No more. It was time and past time to tell them where to head in. He had had enough. So had everybody else in the building.

He swiveled around and got up, but before he had taken his first reluctant step toward the door he heard Dave Ferreira say furiously, "—last chance, you fool! There isn't going to be another one! Think I'd do it again? Time's run out—said so yourself. Look—in the fridge—dare you to throw—forty-eight hours tops—"

By the time Dr. Cantor swung the door all the way open, his colleagues were down the hall, Street with a hand over the ear Ferreira was assaulting.

Confrontation had been taken out of Dr. Cantor's hands. Good. He sat down again at his desk and regarded the newspaper with its ugly international, national, and local freight. Enough of that too, he told himself masterfully, and leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands behind his head, and encouraged his thoughts to turn from death to love and sex and marriage. Presently he dozed, his moustache hiding the sweet smile on his lips.

"Only two new ones on this lovely morning," the chief medical examiner said ten days later, pointing to the ID numbers on the assignment board. He consulted his records. "Let's see. Al, you've done fewer cases this month than anybody else, what with Sally and all, so it'd be only fair if— Oh, what the hell, I don't care who does which, arrange it among yourselves, but one of 'em's a homicide, so somebody get on it. Body's hardly cold but Mac's getting antsy."

The time was nine in the morning. The occasion was the daily meeting re cases finished and cases to be assigned. The body was plenty cold enough, having been fished out of a pond. And Mac was Police Chief Colin MacWhirter, who was known to be difficult and whose Manton, Massachusetts, purview included the pond in which the body had been lying for some days.

"Curious thing about that body of Mac's," the chief medical examiner began. "Didn't have any—"

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Dave Ferreira interrupted with his usual ill temper. "Curious shmurious! Who the hell cares! You don't have to dangle the carrot. I'll take the poor stiff. I'm up on everything anyway and I don't like sitting around. That's what makes *me* antsy. Here, gimme the file." He snatched the folder out of the chief medical examiner's hands and left, effectively ending the meeting.

The chief medical examiner buzzed the assistants downstairs, who wheeled the new bodies from the cold room to the autopsy room, and Doctors Cantor and Street left the office together, arguing amicably about who would do the second body. Street gave up without much of a struggle.

His wife must be worse, 'cause he's sure been looking rotten the last few days, Dr. Cantor thought. "Hey, Al," he said, "not that I want to pry, but I've been meaning to ask how your wife's doing."

Al Street blanched. "Not good. She picked up an infection that won't quit. And after all she's been through!"

"What happened? What's the matter? Her eyes worse?"

"Yeah. Much worse. We—we managed to locate corneas—you didn't hear? Coupla weeks ago—nothing beats pull, kid!—and everything looked just great and then infection set in. We know anything can happen with surgery, we tell ourselves not to take it for granted, sure, but we never think anything bad'll happen to *us*. The doctor's been trying one medication after another but—" His voice broke and he turned and walked the other way, shoulders sagging, step uncertain, mumbling something about finishing a report.

Dr. Cantor went downstairs to the autopsy room where his assistant and the new bodies were waiting. Great, he thought. It'll be quiet for a change, with Al in his office. Poor guy. That wife of his has to be one special lady. I'd sure like to meet her.

Dave Ferreira, dictating rapidly into a tape recorder, was working alone on the body from Police Chief Colin MacWhirter's pond. He always worked alone, because nothing annoyed him more than being observed or helped. Accordingly Dr. Cantor's assistant, a master needler who heartily disliked Ferreira, went over to do just that.

"Get lost. I'm not the one needs help," Ferreira said nastily as he quickly covered the head and continued his visual examination of the neck and chest. His lips tightened with fury.

The faces don't bother *me* any more, Dr. Cantor thought with a certain smugness, pulling on his rubber gloves.

"Okay, let's get going," he told his assistant, not because he wanted to avoid another Ferreira tantrum but because there really

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was a lot to do and he always liked plenty of time to make a hundred and ten percent sure he did it all right. "And would you pick up that bag while you're at it, please, and take off this one."

And that's another thing, he thought, as the assistant picked up MacWhirter's body's shroud and removed the other one and put them neatly folded into the trash bin. Someday I'm gonna tell Dave how I feel when he tears off the body bag and flings it anywhere—yeah, and the way he throws other things when he's really mad. I don't appreciate ducking scalpels and haemostats. Apart from anything else, it lowers the tone of the place.

Won't tell him now, though. Too much else to do. Maybe at lunch, or tomorrow . . . Or I could buy him a drink . . . next week, maybe . . .

The room was quiet except for some muttered curses from Dave Ferreira and Dr. Cantor's sotto voce remarks to his assistant, who thought he was a nice guy but too fussy to ever set the world on fire—it'd take him too long to decide which would do the job better, a cigarette lighter or a match.

Finished, Ferreira wheeled the freshly bagged corpse back to the cold room, and Dr. Cantor instantly relaxed; he was about to plunge into the abdominal cavity again.

"Uh—gotta go to the john real bad," the assistant said, and left too, yawning.

Several days later Al Street was absent, and he stayed away for four days running, which increased the pressure on everybody else.

"What's wrong with Al?" Dr. Cantor asked Ferreira.

"How should I know! Ask him yourself. We all have problems," Ferreira snarled.

"What's with Dr. Street? He sick?" Dr. Cantor asked one of the clerks at lunch.

"No, but I'd be, if I was him. Real sick. His wife had more surgery. She's at the General, in case you wanna send a card or something. Everybody else is."

Dr. Cantor did better than that. He bought flowers and candy as well as a card and on his next free day went into Boston to deliver them in person.

"I'm sorry, Doctor," the receptionist told him, "no visitors. Mrs. Street can't see anybody. I'm sure she'll be glad to have these things, though, if you'd care to leave them. I'll make sure she knows you came in person. Every little thing helps, you know."

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Al Street returned to work a week later, looking like death warmed over. He acknowledged none of the cards and gifts to his wife, ignored all inquiries about her health, and was silent even when Dave Ferreira was around.

Not even the chief medical examiner offered Dr. Cantor any information about what was happening with Al Street's wife, and feeling too new in the building to ask anyone, he didn't.

Dammit, I don't have anybody to really talk to around here, he thought, and wondered—philosophically, of course—if he ever would. It was beginning to look as if what they said about New England was true, that it was the unfriendliest part of the U.S. of A. Maybe he shouldn't've come up here. So what if this job paid better than the one in Texas? What good was money when you didn't have anybody to share it with? At least Texas was sunny.

Dr. Cantor studied an array of pencils, at length chose the right one with which to make notes about the corpse awaiting him, and rose to go below and lose his loneliness in work. And once again he heard two familiar voices arguing outside his door, something that no one in the building had heard in days. So, instead of opening the door, he put his ear to it and listened.

"Don't give me that, you swine, it's your fault—all your fault! It was your idea! Who asked you for help? Did I ask you? Did she? Now what've we got! You won't get away with this, you filthy bastard, because I'm gonna—"

"Tell? Go ahead. That'll help her, won't it. And the kids too, right? Sure, go ahead and tell, I don't give a damn. I've got a lot less to lose than you do. Think about that a minute. *Tchah!*—you and your principles! You make me puke, you pitiful hypocrite!"

The argument stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

Dr. Cantor opened the door and looked down the hall in both directions. The two men were gone, as though a strange magic had vanished them.

Gone with them was Dr. Cantor's depression. He closed the door and went back to his desk to think.

What's happening between those two? he asked himself. A good question to start with. He took the preferred pencil from his pocket and wrote the question down. After a pause he added, They both love the same woman. Al doesn't take it seriously.

But the charged interchange outside his door still vibrated in his mind's ear. Nah, wrong, he said, and wrote every word of it down,

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and knew at once that Dave's feeling for Sally Street was something Al took very seriously indeed.

But why? It wasn't Dave's fault if Mrs. Street had corneal transplants that went sour. Or did Al not want other men to so much as look at his wife? Nah, Al wasn't that kind.

Dr. Cantor stared into space, but nothing of any significance occurred to him. He put the pencil back into his pocket and descended to the cold room to fetch the body he had begun examining before lunch.

The autopsy room was nice and quiet, and he went to work with a will. The brash lad who often assisted him drifted in and, being uninterested in learning anything, but liking this youngest of the pathologists well enough, watched silently.

Dr. Cantor wiped the mess off his gloved hands for the umpteenth time so as to take pencil from tunic pocket and write on his pad.

Boy, is he dumb, the lad thought, wasting time wiping and writing when he can just talk into a tape, like that bastard Ferreira. Oh boy, he thought, grinning, I don't wanna be around if The Mouth ever finds out I've played some of them tapes. He oughta be arrested, the way he talks about the stiffs he chops up.

Moved for once by the respectful care he was witnessing, he said, "Want 'ny help, Grouch?"

"Sure, kid, why not," Dr. Cantor said, even though finishing would take him ten times longer through having to spell every other word—and decode the entries to boot.

"Nice-lookin' guy, this one," the lad said.

"Mmmm."

"Easy death, you think?"

"Mmmm."

"Seen some pretty bad ones."

"Mmmm."

"Seen a real bad one of Ferreira's. Eyeballs gouged out 'n twenny-thirdy stab wounds everyplace. *Yech!* Bet he picks the worst ones, that guy."

"Mmmm."

"Bet you wouldn't be so cool if *you* seen it."

"I can't see them all, kid, there isn't enough time. Okay, heart's done. Now put down lungs."

The lad wrote, adding under his breath, "Bet Street's old lady looks like that now."

"Like what?" Dr. Cantor said absently.

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"Like Ferreira's stiff, the one a coupla weeks ago."

Dr. Cantor looked up. "What're you talking about? I've seen her picture. She's very pretty. Shut up and put down advanced emphysema."

"Not now she ain't, eyeballs all gouged out. A-d-v-a-n-s-e-d e-m-f-a-s-e-e-m-u-h. Okay, got it."

Dr. Cantor laid down his scalpel. "Well, I don't. What's this about Dr. Street's wife?"

"Nothin'. She had a eye operation, she got infected, and the whole entire eyes hadda come out. Like Ferreira's stiff, like I said. The homicide that got fished outa the pond. Doncha remember?"

Dr. Cantor knocked on the chief medical examiner's door, was invited to enter, did so, carefully closed the door, asked one question, said, "Thank you," and "No, no special reason, at least not yet," and left.

Over the weekend he thought about the body fished out of Police Chief MacWhirter's pond, and what the chief medical examiner thought was so curious about it, and how willingly Dave Ferreira volunteered to autopsy it, and how quickly he covered its face against the assistant's approach.

He thought about Sally Street's dangerously low standing on the Eye Bank list, and then the surprisingly sudden operation on her eyes, and the infection, and the second operation.

He reviewed every word of the two arguments on the other side of his office door between two men who loved the same woman, and the exact times in which they occurred.

He understood now not only why the murderer and the accessory after the fact of it had avoided each other for days, but also why Al Street's principles and his love for his family put him, confession-wise, between a rock and a very hard place.

On Sunday night he went over the whole business again, slowly and carefully, building the case whose logic seemed faultless and whose implication was as painful as it was unavoidable.

There was no way to get around that. His duty was clear.

He slept very little Sunday night, because he knew that in the morning he would have to call Chief MacWhirter.

The only thing he diddled around with, predictably, was, should he call before going to the office or after he got there?

"Q"

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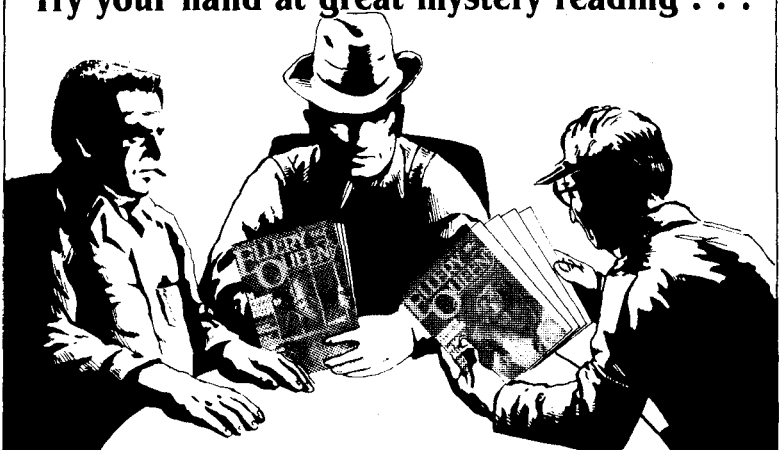

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a *NEW* Inspector Ghote story by

H. R. F. KEATING

The last Ganesh Ghote story to appear in EQMM *("The Crime of Arkady Nikolaivich," June, 1992) provided a glimpse of the inspector in his early days, as a student on a special program in the Soviet Union. Here we take yet a further step back in time to find Ghote as a very young man struggling with the choice of career . . . and finding that it may all hinge on a very small thing . . .*

JUST ONLY ONE SMALL CRIME

by H. R. F. KEATING

Young Ganesh Ghote didn't really know why he had applied to join the Forest Department. From earliest boyhood he had been destined for the Police, a fate always happily accepted. But, reading by chance in his father's *Times of India* an article on "Our Flourishing Forests," a spark of youthful rebellion had suddenly made him determined to change course.

It was a decision that brought him, some months and not a few tense family scenes later, to the bungalow of his boss-to-be, Mr. B. R. Koppiker. And to Mr. Koppiker's sharp-tongued wife and to Mr. Koppiker's ten-year-old son, Ashok, chubby image of his well-fleshed father.

Within an hour of arriving, young Ghote learnt three things. First, Mr. Koppiker's temper was explosive, perhaps because Mrs. Koppiker was insisting on him sticking to a ferocious diet. Second, the way to Mr. Koppiker's good graces, and that hoped-for career, was through little Ashok, apple of his father's eye. Third, Ashok was a spoilt brat.

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But for one week, for two, Ghote managed to walk the tightrope in front of him. He toadied to the ten-year-old horror abominably, and hated himself for it. Shamelessly, at every opportunity he proffered pieces of chocolate, pulled draggingly from melting bars, stuckfast silver paper scraped and peeled away. Yet more effective, because they brought bigger dividends in forbidden (by Mrs. Koppiker) sweetness, were raids on the refrigerator for bottles of syrupy Mangola or sugar-saturated Limca. And at all off-duty hours there were games to be played. Games Ghote had to be careful always to lose, snakes-and-ladders, ludo, draughts. Let alone the times he allowed himself to be hanged, with timber by timber added to the drawing of the gallows, limb by limb to the dangling body, as he deliberately failed to guess the simple, and frequently misspelt, words Ashok had set him.

It soon became almost a pleasure to go marching through the forest in the heat at Mr. Koppiker's heels, bombarded by ill-humoured instruction. But then there came the morning Mr. Koppiker had to go to collect the end-of-the-month wages, and, since Mrs. Koppiker accompanied him "for shopping," Ghote was left to pander to Ashok's every passing whim, increasingly directed towards a box of rich sweetmeats brought by a visiting subordinate the day before, now reposing, on no account to be touched, in the fridge. And all too soon ideas for distractions began to run out.

Luckily, at just the moment Ashok was accusing him of being "no bloody use" (Should he rebuke him for bad language? Or pretend not to have heard?) a servant came out onto the veranda loudly exclaiming, "All-purpose lamp is stolen." Saved by the bell. Instant inspiration suggested a game of Sherlock Holmes. In a couple of minutes a glassless magnifying glass had been fashioned from a long twig off the neem tree in the compound, and guess-who had become a discreetly guiding Watson. Guide, not to finding the missing torch, but to spinning out discovery as long as possible.

Because Ghote had in fact rapidly worked out what had happened to the all-purpose lamp. Kept for emergencies on a shelf by the door, it had simply been misplaced somehow, hidden under Mr. Koppiker's monsoon raincoat. But as long as the infant Holmes's nose could be kept on false scents there would be no more demands to visit the refrigerator.

Yet it could not last. "Stupid game. Silly game. What good is Sherlock Holmes?"

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So nothing for it but to guide the insistent sleuth towards his father's hanging coat, and the all-purpose lamp. Yet success in detection, as Ghote had feared, failed to edge out other thoughts. "Uncle, that was just only one small crime. Uncle, now I am wanting one cold drink." But "Uncle" Ghote knew it was not for Mangola that Ashok wanted the refrigerator to be visited. Those luscious sweetmeats, each in its paper nest, awaited.

Nothing would put Ashok off, not more ludo, not another hangman word. And, when at last the fridge was opened, it was, at once, "Uncle, take out sweetmeats box, just only for one look."

Ghote offered Mangola. Even two bottles at once. But the demand simply grew more insistent. Then came threats. "I would tell Daddyji you are one nasty fellow."

So, at last, the inevitable. But. But when the box was opened all that was revealed were two of the least succulent sweetmeats sitting sadly in opposite corners.

"Now there has been one big, big crime," Ashok shouted, in a fury of deprivation.

Ghote thought fast. Although the disappearance was in no way his fault, he guessed he would be the one Ashok held responsible. But perhaps, just perhaps, if he could reignite the Sherlock flame, and steer it to a greater success than before, his stock would stay high. Until the return of Mr. Koppiker.

"One big crime," he said. "Sherlock Holmes would soon find out who has committed same. He would look, you know, in the servants' quarters, everywhere, until he was spotting the papers from those sweetmeats." Immediately Ashok rushed off, even in his eagerness to claim full credit forbidding Watson to follow.

Ghote retired to the veranda, put his feet up on a cane stool, relaxed.

He was woken from an exhausted sleep by two events coming almost at the same moment. Mr. Koppiker's jeep roared up, and Ashok arrived, shrieking and yelling, from inside.

"Mummyji, Mummyji, look what I am finding. I am Sherlock itself, Mummyji. In Daddyji's study, in his basket only, papers from sweetmeats he has taken in the night. Me, me, I was finding. Ghote sahib was just only Watson."

Then Mrs. Koppiker darted her dieting husband one of her very sharpest looks. And then Mr. Koppiker, at once seeing the Watson as the true investigator in the case, gave young Ghote one of his most baleful glares.

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"Very clever, young man," he snapped. "Very, very clever. You should be a police officer only."

Ghote gulped. But, light flooding in, he faced Mr. Koppiker and gave him his answer.

"Yes, sir, you are hundred percent right. I should be a police officer. Definitely."

DETECTIVERSE

NO NOOSE
IS
GOOD NOOSE

by MARIE E. TRUITT

"Full many's the neck this
culprit has wrung!"
Roars the D.A., full-voice
and full-lung.
Twelve men disagree. . . .
The culprit goes free!
Alas! 'Twas the jury was
hung!

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In this third outing for his series character patrolman Julian Hall, author David Dean, also a working cop, recreates the kind of day that must be familiar to any small-town police department. A day when nothing, but nothing seems to be happening. Until that critical call comes in . . .

ANGELA'S BABY

by DAVID DEAN

Julian made the mistake of walking into the dispatcher's area just as the call came in.

He'd been in the squad room for the past hour dotting i's and crossing t's on reports that had been dotted and crossed a week before. He had carefully re-read them to insure thoroughness and accuracy, and found them as thorough and accurate as the last time he had looked at them. Ordinarily he avoided hanging out in the station when he should have been on patrol, but today he was guilty of it and knew it. He had kept trying to find a comfortable position to recline in, but every time he got close the sergeant thrust his impatient head through the door. His sergeant held no great love for Julian and found his reasons for being off the road suspect. Any sign of comfort on the part of the patrolman and he would pounce. But Julian always managed to appear studious, suspiciously so in the sergeant's mind, and he had finally and reluctantly withdrawn.

Moments later, Julian had heard the clang of the steel door leading to the carport and over his portable the voice of the sergeant signing on patrol. "Seven hundred to seven."

"Go ahead seven hundred."

"I guess I'm ten-forty-one. Let me know when we get another car on the road."

Even in the brief ten-code language used on the radio, the sergeant managed to convey his displeasure. Julian read the subtext as "If I can't get an officer on patrol, I guess I'll have to do it myself."

"Silly twit," he thought. "Why doesn't he just tell me to get on the road?"

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He stood and stretched, smiling slightly at having caused some irritation, and sauntered into the hallway. It was getting lonely in the squad room without his monitor.

Julian knew he was being contrary but he couldn't help himself. He felt restless and cranky. It was day shift. The worst of all shifts in his opinion. Worse than that, it was day shift in the off-season. The tourists were gone, leaving behind empty streets and houses. Even the mounds of beer cans and broken furniture left at the curb on Labor Day had long been carted away. Winter had crept up on fall, laying its spell on the town as surely as Merlin had cast his spell on its namesake, Camelot.

The calls on day shift were enough to make a saint weep. Old ladies who needed help in finding Foo-Foo, the toy poodle. Doors standing open on empty houses. Julian recalled one old girl insisting the house behind her was suspicious, due to lights being on at night and it being unoccupied. On that point she was unshakable. No one had been there for months. Julian almost shot her new neighbors. And so it went, hours of boredom followed by moments of inanity.

That was why he was hiding out, opening and closing file folders, checking the tension on his ballpoint's spring, pointing out areas the janitor missed, and generally being a nuisance.

He wandered towards the sound of the dispatcher's voice, arriving just in time for the call.

Julian edged his way into the dispatch room and looked for a comfortable chair. This would be a good time to go over with the operators the dispatcher's proper role in the police world. Julian settled into a cushioned office chair and began to mull over examples he could use to illustrate his point. Subtly, of course. No sense in antagonizing anyone. The phone call Emma was fielding was taking entirely too long, perhaps he could start there. Just a few suggestions on asking the right questions to get the pertinent info. He began to listen in.

Emma, a large and formidable woman in her late forties, was having her usual chat, it seemed. She considered this one of her many privileges on the job and was less than tolerant of those patrolmen who might question it. She peered over glasses at Julian, fixing him with her basilisk stare and then, to insure there was no misunderstanding, pointed at him. This was in the way of letting him know that she intended him to handle this call. She also favored him with a tiny smile, smug that she had headed him off at the

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pass. The sergeant had warned her that he was in one of his funks and might be headed her way.

Julian had found a Most Wanted poster and studied it deeply, avoiding even a glance at the gloating dispatcher. In what he had overheard of the conversation, words like plumber, gas, and no heat had popped up. He thought this an excellent time to hang the poster up in the sergeant's office. He stood to do just that and started for the door. Behind him he heard the phone receiver click into its cradle.

"I have a call for you, dear." The high-pitched voice with its peculiar drawl always had the same effect on him. To not do whatever was requested.

"Emma, I'm a little busy right now." He lied pathetically. "Don't we have a car that's free?"

The smile broadened. Her glee was barely contained.

"Yesss, but the sergeant said I was to give you the next call. I have the next call all ready for you. Are you ready for it?"

So, they've plotted this out, have they? Julian almost pouted. Save the worst, most mundane assignment for Julian and kick him out on the road with it! He envisioned himself executing various takedown tactics on a pleading dispatcher.

"What's it all about . . . dear?" he purred.

"It seems a lady over on Seventy-fourth Street has a problem with her plumber. She called him to take a look at her furnace. Which he did. He claims he couldn't find anything wrong with it. When he went back out to his truck she locked him out! He says he's still got some tools inside and he wasn't paid!"

"Oh, for God's sake, this is a civil matter!" Julian whined. "What was the original problem?"

"A smell of gas."

"All right, all right, I'll see if I can get this hashed out. Put me ten-seventy-six. Give me the house number once I come up on the air."

Julian left the station and cruised south.

The address was a two hundred number almost in the center of the block. An ancient cottage with an improbable concrete porch running the width of the front. A set of sliding glass doors opened onto it.

Julian parked the squad car a few doors down and walked up. He never liked to announce his presence until he was ready. The first thing he noticed was that the plumber had departed the scene. No

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truck or van was around. Emma had told him en route that the lady in question lived on the first floor, so he avoided the slider, figuring from experience that it led to the living room, where she was probably waiting. Instead, he crept up to the kitchen door, on the side of the house, and peeked in.

The kitchen was a shambles. Every available surface was covered with crusty dishes and silverware, the sink being the only place spared. The trash can was filled to overflowing with disposable diapers. Through an open inner door he could make out a slice of the living area. It looked like someone had blown up a Goodwill toy box. Broken, filthy toys were strewn everywhere. The one couch that was visible had obviously been supplied by the benevolent realtor. Julian made a mental note to avoid sitting on it.

One last look before entering, he thought, and knocked loudly twice on the door. He then walked quickly to the front, ducking under the kitchen window as he passed, and arrived at the sliding glass doors. He peeked in just in time to see a short, overweight woman walk quickly and forcefully through to the kitchen. He noted that she carried nothing in her hands. Good, he thought, at least she's not laying for the plumber.

The living room was no surprise after the kitchen. The same designer had obviously trashed both rooms. Besides the toys, secondhand furniture, and yet more dirty dishes, Julian noticed an empty playpen near the center of the floor.

Having satisfied himself that he had the advantage, Julian rapped loudly on the glass. The fat woman came striding out of the kitchen, a confused look on her face. Julian noted again that her hands were empty as she did so. He remembered from officer survival school that kitchens were notorious for supplying murder weapons.

When she slid back the door, her face had a look of bewilderment and agitation that was only partly due to Julian's methods. He could see in an instant that the uniform disturbed her. Her small, furtive eyes gave away the alarm that she was trying to hide.

"Yes, Officer, is something the matter?" she inquired in a carefully controlled voice.

Her face was nothing pleasant to look at, thought Julian. The hair was long, straight, and unwashed and the eyebrows had been plucked out of existence. The heavy cheeks bordered on becoming jowls and, along with her chin, were lightly haired. Still, there was something about her . . . a gentle, beseeching quality that was attractive.

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"You're having a problem with your plumbing?" Julian started, then realized that he was confusing her more. What was he going to do, pull out a wrench and go to work on the pipes? Before he could clarify his question, she reached out and touched the sleeve of his jacket.

"Yes, yes, please come in."

Julian did as he was bidden and entered the sour-smelling living room. She quickly closed the door behind him. Julian regretted that. She took small, mincing steps now, like those of a child afraid of admonishment, and stood before him. She was just short of wringing her hands. The contrast to the purposefully striding woman he had glimpsed earlier was disturbing.

"I'm Patrolman Hall," he offered. "Julian Hall."

She seemed far away now, wrestling with something in her mind. She looked down and didn't respond.

"It's an odd name, isn't it . . . Julian?"

No response. He decided to plow on, to give her time.

"My mother says I was named after a saint. A fella who took care of anyone that needed it. The sick, the lame, even lepers." Still nothing.

"My father, on the other hand, says I was named after a Roman emperor, called Julian the Apostate. His claim to fame was persecuting the Christians."

She glanced up a little fearfully at him.

"But I like to think that I took after the first guy. Maybe that's why I got into this line of work. To help people. All people."

She smiled anxiously at him and said, "My name is Angela. I'm not a Christian, but I respect their values."

Julian smiled encouragingly back.

"So, Angela, you've had a problem of some sort with the heater or the repairman?" He noted the chill in the house as he spoke.

She took a seat on a stuffed rocking chair, so he reluctantly perched on the very edge of the offensive sofa.

"It's the gas, you see. I can smell it sometimes very strongly. Like now. Do you smell that?"

Julian didn't. All he could smell was decaying food and the faint odor of stale urine. He was glad it was cold in the house. She was staring at him with a curious mixture of pleading and defiance. He lied a little.

"Yeah, now that you mention it, I do think I catch a whiff of something now and again."

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She nodded her large head vigorously in agreement and leaned forward in her excitement.

"That man said he couldn't smell anything like that. He was lying. I don't know why he was lying, though. He may have been watching the house a few days ago. I'm pretty sure I saw him walk past the house several times."

Julian thought of the unlikeliness of that happening and began to ponder what he had walked into.

"I'll have to check into that," he murmured. "He did check around, though, didn't he? To make sure there were no gas leaks?"

She wouldn't reply, so he stood up and said, "How 'bout I take a look at the appliances? Just to make sure there's not a pilot light out."

"He did that," she said flatly.

Julian walked into the kitchen, ostensibly to inspect the stove, but actually to buy a little time to think. In spite of it being cool in the house, he was starting to sweat a bit. A glance at the stove and oven showed all the pilot lights to be lit. The water heater the same. He had expected the stench of the diapers in the trash can to be excruciatingly powerful and was relieved that they weren't. He wondered why and peered down at the disgusting mound. They were old. He knew from when his own kids were babies that these were definitely not fresh. They were dry and crusted. Almost odorless. Thank God, he thought.

He stepped back into the living room and saw at once that she was gone. A slight movement in the darkened hallway to his left sent a jolt of adrenaline through him and he spun around to face it.

She was standing halfway down the hall, silhouetted by the window at the rear of the house. He knew she was facing him when she spoke. For some reason, he had been terribly afraid that she had had her back to him. He knew he wouldn't have liked that.

"That's the furnace," she said, and pointed at a large grate in the floor. The thermostat was at shoulder level on the wall to her right.

Julian took a breath and mentally shook himself. He took a few steps forward and stopped. He peered down into the darkness and saw the living eye of the furnace. A small, dancing flame captured underneath a glass viewer. Its fits and starts were hypnotic in the gloom. It was an old, outdated style. He was not even sure they were made anymore. They shouldn't be, he thought, they're dangerous as hell. The heating unit itself was set about three feet below floor level and provided gas-fed flames. These heated the air directly

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above and hopefully, but rarely, wafted currents of warmth into adjoining rooms. This one was shut off, denying it the chance to do even that.

He remembered an identical floor unit in the home he had grown up in and thought of the faint checkered scars on his palms. Scars from a fall onto that scorching grate when he was just a baby learning to walk. Just a baby.

"Angela, where is the baby?"

There was a long, still pause.

"Asleep. He's in his crib, asleep," she answered in a small, faraway voice.

For some reason that he could not fathom at that moment, a tiny alarm went off in his head. Even though he was perspiring, a chill from the dank house settled over Julian.

"Angela, maybe we had better turn on the heat for a little while. You know, it's awfully damp and chilly in here. The baby might catch cold."

She seemed to start awake, stung by his words. "No! The baby's fine! I would never do anything to hurt him. I haven't done anything wrong now, have I? I can't turn on the heat or run the water because of the gas, don't you see? You smelled it yourself. You said so! It's poison gas! I've seen it!"

Julian stood stock-still as the winds of madness blew around him. He tried not to show his shock.

Something she had said awoke a memory in Julian's mind. Just a brief, inconsequential flashback to the warm summer. A call about a child locked in a running car at a local convenience store. He recalled a blond, happy baby smiling and laughing at the perspiring policemen trying to work the door open with a slim jim. And the mother, who had called them, standing at his shoulder, wringing her hands, unable to stop crying, saying, "I didn't do anything wrong! It was an accident!"

They had never thought otherwise and had paid her little attention. It had been Angela . . . and Angela's baby.

Now he stood with her in a darkened hallway, in a dank, depressing shack with flecks of her spittle drying on his face. Separated by a furnace and a gulf of madness. He felt very much alone. He needed time and help. He needed a plan.

It was obvious to him now that he had to get Angela to the hospital for evaluation. Voluntarily or not. And he didn't think it would be voluntary. He also had to get to the boy and make sure he was all

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right. The baby would have to be turned over to the Family Services people for a while.

She continued to stand in the hallway, blocking his access to the bedrooms at the rear of the house. He suspected that she had chosen that position on purpose. She was guarding her young. Guarding him from the authorities, poison gas, and whatever else she perceived as a threat. But how far was she prepared to go? How far had she already gone? The silence of the bedrooms, the old, stale diapers, and the cracked, waiting toys all weighed heavily on Julian's mind.

He could hear her taking rapid, shallow breaths in the dimness. He spoke quietly across to her.

"You're right, of course. I wasn't thinking. That's not unusual for me, though. Now, about this gas. We're going to have to go over a few heads on this. Since it's obvious that the local workers can't be trusted, I think it's time we brought in a county inspector. It's the only way to get to the bottom of this. How's that sound?"

The sun was beginning its slow descent into late afternoon and a ray of it began to illuminate the hall. Just enough for Julian to make out the wary, frightened face across from him. She seemed to be weighing his words carefully. Julian noticed that her mouth was set in a determined line.

"The gas is purple. I've seen it sometimes when I've had to use the sink. It comes out of the pipes. It seeps out from the stove and heater, too. It forms a haze around the ceiling sometimes and I have to open the doors and windows to keep it from building up. Tell them that."

Purple haze. Jimi Hendrix was right, Julian thought. "I will," he replied. "That's good information, something to work with.

"Angela, I'm gonna step out to my car to use the radio for the inspector. While I'm doing that, why don't you wrap up the baby and meet me out there. There's no sense in you two staying in a dangerous situation. We'll leave that to the inspector, and come back when we get the all clear."

Julian's palms were sweating with tension. Would she buy it or not? Either way, he had to go out to the car. He couldn't risk using her phone, so he would have to use the one in the car. He didn't like it, but the department and the Family Services had to be briefed. And he couldn't risk a struggle alone with the woman. Psychotics could be inhumanly strong and dangerous. If the baby had been okay so far, then a few more minutes would probably not make any difference. If he wasn't, then time was of no matter, anyway.

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"All right," she said, and smiled. It was not reassuring. She watched him walk towards the sliding door, not giving up her position. His back felt wide and vulnerable. He began patting himself down and said loudly, "Where did I put my keys?"

Julian dug into his front pants-pocket, coming up with a handful of change, which he promptly dropped, coins scattering all over the floor. As he was gathering them up, he slipped a quarter into the track of the sliding glass door. He straightened up, glanced over his shoulder at the silent woman in the darkness, smiled goofily, and walked out, praying she hadn't noticed.

Julian had decided to use the newly installed car phone to avoid attracting the ghouls that monitored the police band. The situation was bad enough without onlookers cruising the street for a look at the madwoman of Camelot.

He spoke directly to the sergeant and explained as well and briefly as he could what he was attempting. He asked for a backup car to be in the area, in case things blew up. The sergeant advised him to switch his portable to channel two and that he would have the backup car monitor the same. In the meantime, he would contact the social workers for Julian and have them standing by at the hospital.

As he was cradling the phone to his ear, he saw her rush the door. "Oh, shit!" was his last communication to the sergeant as he dropped the receiver and began the fifty-yard dash for the door. He could just make out her bulk behind the glass as she slammed it once again into the wedged quarter, the door tilting forward as it met resistance. She saw him coming and did an abrupt about-face and charged back into the shadows. Julian had just time enough to catch a glimpse of a wrapped bundle in her right arm before she disappeared. He leapt up onto the porch and threw back the door.

Inside, it seemed darker than ever, as his eyes tried to adjust to the sudden transition. In the hallway he could just make out a large something in the center of the hall. It was about three feet tall and seemed to be vanishing into the floor. Suddenly it stopped and began to reverse itself, growing in height as it did so. An arm detached itself from the shapeless mass and reached for the wall. The arm lowered the furnace grate back to the floor and Angela stood up, puffing. She leaned against the wall to her right, her hand covering the thermostat. Julian could make out her face now, grim and wild, a sheen of sweat coating it. His own face was not much different.

He took it all in and began to feel a little sick. She had placed something in the furnace and that something had looked very much

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like a baby swaddled in a blanket. She now stood in control of the thermostat. Her whole body was a picture of defiance; her face, a mask of cunning triumph.

But why hadn't the baby cried out? Surely, with all that jostling, it would have been startled and cried. In fact, the whole time that he had been there the baby had not made one sound. Did that mean that he was already dead? That she had taken the ultimate step in protecting him from those mysterious and malevolent forces that crowded her world? Or was he drugged? With all the drugs that she had undoubtedly been prescribed over the years, it was a distinct possibility.

"Well, we're all set now," he began, feeling as if his mouth were filled with cotton. "The inspector's on his way, so we can get out of here. You about ready?" Julian asked with all the nonchalance he could muster. His heavy breathing belied his words.

She wasn't buying it. The trump card was under her right hand. "You get out of here," she hissed. "You think I'm crazy? I know what you're up to. No one's taking my baby. They sent you to get him, didn't they? I recognize you, even in that uniform. You don't fool me. I've looked out my windows and you've been there. Watching. I've seen you and the others standing in the darkness staring at my house!" Her hand convulsed on the thermostat, the tendons popping out like cables.

Julian had to restrain himself from rushing her. He would never make it in time. They were only separated by about eight feet, but all she needed was a flick of the wrist. He imagined the quiet click of the thermostat, followed seconds later by the whoosh of ignited gas. A sudden, roaring flame erupting around the child lying on the deadly jets. He didn't move. Neither did she.

He let his left hand drift to the portable radio on his belt. As he began to speak, he depressed the transmit button and held it.

"Angela, you've gotten off your medication, haven't you?" he began quietly. "Sometimes, when someone's been prescribed something, they forget to take it. Or they start feeling better and think they don't need it anymore. I think that's what's happened here, isn't it?"

She was silent. But he thought she seemed interested.

"That's all I'm concerned with. I don't want to separate you and the baby. I just want you to feel better, more comfortable. If we visit with the doctor, I think he'll get you set right up. A new prescription, maybe. But we have to get the baby out of there first. He can't be

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comfortable in there. The furnace is a dangerous place for him." He prayed that the backup car heard the transmission and understood the situation.

She looked mesmerized. Her face was slack and dazed. She seemed to be reading his lips as he spoke, mouthing some of the words. He eased forward a few inches.

"No," she gurgled, rising slowly to the surface. "Please, no, I'm afraid. I can't trust you. They'll take my baby." She was almost moaning, the anxiety crushing her.

"Remember last summer, Angela?" Julian asked as he slid a couple more inches along the wall. "Remember when the baby got locked in the car, by accident?"

She looked at him sharply, remembering the incident.

"Remember how I got him out of the car? He was beautiful and happy, wasn't he? And I gave him right to you, didn't I? You were so worried that you were in trouble, but it was just an accident, and I handed him right over. You didn't do anything wrong. Let me help now."

Her arm drifted down from the thermostat a fraction. Julian could see that she was exhausted. She was looking at the grate. He crept forward again. She looked up suddenly, catching him at it. The arm shot back in place, the hand gripping the mechanism.

"Angela, don't!" Julian pleaded in a hushed whisper. "There's no going back if you do. Do you understand me? We can't undo this once it's done. Please talk to me. I won't make another move, unless you want me to. I promise." The hand didn't move and neither did the eyes as they searched his face. She wants to believe me, he thought.

Somewhere in the apartment he heard a clock ticking in the silence. The chill he had noticed earlier had gotten inside his jacket now and his teeth began to chatter with the cold and tension. The shadows had lengthened considerably as the sun slid slowly down the sky. A single ray of light created a halo around Angela, leaving her face in ever-deepening gloom. Something yellow bobbed into view on a rooftop that could be seen over her shoulder.

Julian tried not to stare as Large Albert's blond head popped into view once more, slowly followed by his massive shoulders and arms lifting a ludicrously small Marlin carbine to his cheek. Albert was one of the best shots in the department and could hardly miss the large silhouetted head of the unknowing Angela, even at fifty yards.

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Julian's palms were sweating profusely now. Time was running out for her. He didn't want her to die, he knew that. Not standing there in front of him, listening to him, weighing his words, almost trusting him. There was a small click underneath Angela's palm. He could just make out a look of puzzlement cross her face.

The temperature! Jesus Christ! It was dropping by the moment. "Angela, set the temperature lower on the thermostat! Hurry, before it kicks on!" he pleaded.

She jumped at his voice and hesitated. There was another tiny click. Julian pictured the small bulb of mercury tilting over to make its connection. The electric pulse to the furnace would be a matter of seconds.

Suddenly she wrenched the dial forward, understanding coming late. There was another click as the circuit was disconnected. Silence followed.

Julian expected a nine-millimeter bullet to erupt from her forehead after the sudden movement. He keyed his mike and began talking desperately, trying to save her and the baby.

"Very good, very good! That was good, Angela. Now, I just want you to make sure it's on its lowest setting, okay? It's getting cold in here and we don't want any accidents, do we?" He was babbling in his relief, but couldn't help himself. She glanced at the dial and looked up at him, clearly shaken.

"Now then, let's get things wrapped up, Angela." He was going to take control now. "You love the child, anyone can see that. You don't really want any harm to come to him, so why don't you step back from the furnace now and let me get him out?" He could see tears glistening on her cheeks in the remaining light. She still didn't move. "Angela, the temperature's dropping by the minute. It can't be much above fifty degrees in this house right now. Even on its lowest setting that furnace is gonna kick on soon. Are you listening to me? We have to do something right away. The baby is in danger, Angela!"

A low moan broke forth from her tightly clamped lips, sending a chill down Julian's spine. It rose higher as she wrapped her free arm around herself and began to rock. It was the sound of the lost in hell.

"I don't know what to do!" she cried. "This is my baby, he came from me. You didn't give him to me! He's not yours to take away! I love him but I have to be careful now. 'Specially now that I know what happens. They change them, you know. My little Timmy was

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changed! Did you know that? After they took him, he was programmed. They wouldn't give him back and when I went to see him, he didn't love me anymore! They brainwashed a little boy so that he wouldn't love his mommy anymore. They wouldn't let me take him back home and he . . . he ran from me when I tried to hold him!" The confession was coming out of her in great, tearing sobs now. Julian felt his own eyes grow hot and moist as he watched her. He thought briefly of his own children.

It was all becoming clear to him now, as he remembered with a sudden clarity that hot summer afternoon. A crying, hysterical Angela, even heavier than she was now, and a robust little boy, smiling and laughing at the efforts of his rescuers. Not an infant, but a little boy that even then must have been a toddler. He could not have been that tiny, swaddled bundle that Angela had carried so easily in one arm. It was all she had left of him, he guessed, a memory, a token, a favorite doll wrapped in one of the child's old blankets.

Her face was covered by her long hair as she hung her head and sobbed quietly. Her hand slid down the wall. Julian took a full step closer, still wary of alarming her, keying his mike again as he did so. He spoke softly across the remaining few feet.

"Angela, he's not here, is he?" She looked up at him, puzzled. Over his shoulder he saw Albert's head come up off the rifle. He was puzzled also. Julian could only hope that he would understand what was transpiring. "Let's go out of here now. It's cold and getting dark and we both need a rest. So I'm going to walk over to you now and I don't want you to be scared, okay?"

"What . . . what did you say?" she gasped.

"There's no sense in prolonging this anymore, Angela," he continued in a strong and level voice. "Let's go now before something bad happens." Julian took another step forward. He had one foot on the furnace grate now. Her arm shot back out to the thermostat.

"Stop," she pleaded, panic rising in her voice. "Don't make me do it! I don't want to hurt him!"

"And you're not going to," he replied. "Because he's not in there."

"Oh yes, he is, he is!" She glanced down as if to reassure herself.

"And even if he was, you wouldn't hurt him anyway, would you?" Julian stood in the center of the grate now.

"Oh God, oh my God," she cried out. "You're making me do this!"

He reached out now with his left arm, releasing the mike button and severing his connection with the outside world, and placed his hand over hers.

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As if released from a tremendous inner pressure, she dropped forward into his arms, weeping, causing him to stagger back slightly. His grip on her hand remained firm, though, and she let him gently peel back her fingers, dropping her arm to her side. He cradled her for a moment and rocked her from side to side. Behind her back he gave the all clear signal to Large Albert and saw him slide from view.

Next to him, he heard once again the ominous metallic click of the heating control in the frigid silence. The sun slid out of the sky to the west and seemed to suck the remaining warmth from the room. The furnace would activate itself, just as he had predicted. He thought of the flammable properties of the wool and plastic lying in the furnace and carefully disengaged himself from the now docile Angela.

Leaning over to pull up the grate, he heard the second click above his head. Not a moment to spare, he thought, and quickly yanked up the covering. He was greeted by the acrid smell of fresh urine and a tiny mewing sound in the darkness. The smallest of hands waved up at him.

Julian's sense of reality fell away from him in a sudden rush, making him feel as if he were about to topple into an endless hole. Flames erupted from the furnace, causing him to reel back involuntarily. A terrified wail followed it, and he nearly dove back in, grabbing the baby and stripping away the smoldering blanket in one movement, flinging himself backwards as he did so. Behind him, he heard Angela's anguished cry.

He stood up, holding the frightened baby at arm's length, inspecting it. Miraculously, he was unscorched. A perfect little boy, a newborn. Angela's baby . . . her second baby. He handed him to his mother, kicked the grate back into place, and walked them outside to the patrol car, shaking so badly that he could hardly walk. He prayed silently that tomorrow would be boring.

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a *NEW* short story by

JAMES POWELL

From James Powell we always expect something off-beat and imaginative, but he never loses his power to astound us—especially in the realm of crime fantasy, where he reigns supreme . . .

THE KING OF THE ORANGUTANS

by JAMES POWELL

The smokey, stuttering cry of a great horned owl had lured me away from the party and out onto the dark lawn. A bird large enough to take a rat or a skunk, I remembered reading somewhere, which gave me a start. For my wife had just whispered the names of those same animals to describe me. Then she'd turned on her heels and stormed back to the party, our guests and, more specifically, artist/photographer Buck Hooper whose *Flat Fauna*, a collection of color shots of highway road kill, was the coffee-table book of the moment.

I made for the bottles on the kitchen table and was pouring myself a stiff one when I heard the owl call. On another night, in another mood, my wife and I would have gone looking for it together. My revenge tonight was to take the big flashlight and my drink and go out to find it alone.

I hurried down the slope in front of the house with long, unsteady steps, feeling hard done by and anxious to put the party noises behind me. I would find the owl and dazzle him with my light. Then he, the goggle-eyed bird, and I, the goggle-eyed drunk, would stare at each other. And I would recite Tennyson's

"Alone and warming his five wits,
The white owl in the belfry sits."

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That was my plan. But when the bird called again it was from the Hollowells, the place next door. So I sat me down with my drink on the ruins of the old stone wall at the edge of our property and waited for the bird to call again. From someplace else. I had already been to the Hollowells. I wasn't going to go back.

A few mornings after we moved in I'd set out to explore the ten acres of woodland behind the house and, more specifically, to find Abraham's Hollow, the little bit of history that had come with the place. According to the real-estate agent, during the Civil War the locals had used this shallow valley back in our woods with the creek running through it to hide their cattle from a rebel foraging party during a Confederate thrust northward. I started out my walk following the surveyors' stakes along the west side of the property. But bramble and saplings as thick as buggy whips flourished between the old growth trees and I quickly gave up the straight line for the easiest path I could find. It was tough sledding, let me tell you. After about an hour I stumbled on the overgrown remains of an old sunken road, perhaps the one the farmers had used to drive their cattle to safety. I was well sweated, scratched, and whipped by then, happy to call it a day and take the old road back. But I hadn't gone far before the road made a sharp turn and passed under a barbwire fence with a cardboard No Trespassing sign still fresh from the hardware store tacked to every other fence post.

Well, the walking looked easy beyond the barbwire, while turning back meant another hour of crashing through the brush. So I decided to clamber over the fence and introduce myself in a neighborly way to the Hollowells. We'd all have a laugh about my losing my way and when I left I'd take their driveway down to the main road.

I was going over my little speech of introduction and hoping I wouldn't have to deal with farm dogs before I got to use it when suddenly the trees ended. There stood a modest stuccoed farmhouse amid a clutter of run-down outbuildings. Directly in front of me was the end of a cinder-block building of recent construction, a long, low structure that pointed toward the farmhouse. As I watched, a tall, angular woman with hair the color of weathered siding appeared at the far end of the building. She had her back to me and was carrying a heavy mop pail and mop. I called but she didn't hear me and quickly vanished behind a woodshed. A moment later I heard the screen door of the farmhouse slam. Hurrying after her, I reached the end of the long low building. Here I encountered a strong smell

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coming through the open door, a mixture of sweat and animal waste, humidity, wet concrete, and old oranges. This strange, unnatural, and yet, somehow, familiar smell made me turn to look inside the building as I passed. In that split second I thought I saw a truck tire hanging from the ceiling. And I said to myself, "Either the Hollowells have kids or they keep an orangutan." Suddenly a scowling, middle-aged man in overalls was standing in the doorway. "Hey, what the hell you doing here?" he called after me. The shotgun cradled in his arm more than made up for his weak chin and mustache.

"Mr. Hollowell?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm Hollowell," he replied, his words a worn sing-song given too many times before. "And this is the Hollowell place. But it ain't mine. Been out of my family since I was a kid. Mr. Ignatz owns it now. Didn't you see them signs?" He interrupted my explanation of how I'd come to be there. "Mr. Ignatz ain't here. Anyway, he don't like snoopers around."

By then I'd located the end of the driveway. "All right," I said, getting on my high horse, "when Mr. Ignatz gets back, just tell him his neighbor dropped by to introduce himself. Say I won't be bothering him again. He can count on that." I started toward the driveway.

Taking a quick glance at his wristwatch, Hollowell put himself in my road. "Find your way out the way you came," he ordered, making an urgent gesture with his chin which he backed up by placing the shotgun aslant across his upper body, as if ready to push me with it. There was nothing for me to do but turn and walk back toward the barbwire with Hollowell marching three paces behind me. "Hey," he said, "don't blame me. Mr. Ignatz doesn't like you or your kind. Don't ask me why. Like the man says, that's the way the cookie crumbles. That's the way the ball bounces."

As we entered the trees, a roar of engines made me look over my shoulder. Two motorcycles of the easy-rider breed, where the cyclist sits well back on the machine, came wheeling into the driveway. The riders wore black helmets and black leather jackets. Hollowell stepped over to block my view and hurry me along. But not before I saw a van with "Ignatz Industries" written on the side follow in after them.

As I muttered my way back over the barbwire, Hollowell said, "Jesus, man, don't blame me for the way things are. Mr. Ignatz likes

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me. And if I do my job good, he'll make it easy for me to buy the place back when he moves to New York."

Hollowell's words gave me something to chew on during the hard walk home. The fact was, I'd already seen that Ignatz Industries van a couple of times before. Our first day in town to look at property, I'd left Helen at the motel and walked down to the business district for a haircut. The van had been parked at the curb in front of a convenience store next to the barber shop. (And I think it might have been Hollowell at the counter inside the store buying lottery tickets.) As I passed by I sensed a pair of eyes inside sizing me up through the tinted window on the passenger side. Suddenly I knew I'd been judged and found wanting. This feeling was so strong and the menace that went along with it so threatening that I decided to forego the haircut and go back to the motel.

But the next time I stood my ground. It was right after we bought the house. I had painted a sign that said The Hedges and was hanging it above our mailbox at the bottom of the driveway. (I'm Red Hedges. If you know children's books you'll know my Mrs. Muscovia Waddell, the fat and fussy little duck with her twelve little ducklings. I've been writing and illustrating her adventures for almost fifteen years now.) The van slowed as it came abreast of me as if to read the sign, as if the name was being marked for future reference. I stared back, challenging the dark hostile windshield, trying to give as good as I got. But it wasn't easy. I could sense how much whoever it was inside loathed me. Now I knew it was Mr. Ignatz and that Mr. Ignatz was my neighbor.

I woke when my glass slipped from my fingers. I don't know how long I'd been nodding there on the stone wall waiting for the owl to call again. I felt chilly. Then the bird hooted, this time from the trees on the other side of the road beyond the Hollowell place. I struck off toward the sound across a broad gully of rocks and weeds—mullen, blood-stemmed pokeberry, horseweed, and bramble—that angled toward the road. When I reached it I climbed over the guardrail and was halfway across when suddenly a motorcycle came roaring around the corner going like a bat out of hell. The cyclist swerved sharply to avoid me as I stood turned to stone on the center line. He lost his balance and went down, his heavy machine spinning across the macadam, the tip of one handlebar tracing loops of sparks in the darkness. The cyclist had come crashing down onto

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the gravel beside the guardrail. I was halfway to him when the motorcycle smashed into a culvert abutment. The blast made me stagger.

The man's black leather jacket had "King's Messengers" written across the back, which sounded more like the name of a gospel vocal group than a motorcycle gang. As I reached him, he rolled over and fumbled with the strap of his helmet. I told him to lie back and rest, but my words might just have been so much gibberish. He continued to struggle with the strap. Then he got the helmet off and looked up at me with dazed eyes. I almost dropped the flashlight. The cyclist was an orangutan, face leather, cinnamon chin hair, small deep-set eyes and all! As I stared in amazement at this fugitive from an animal act, or whatever the hell he was, he ran the tips of the fingers of one hand over his eyes and then along his lips, as if to mimic someone trying to pull his thoughts together. Then he saw me and, motioning me closer, he pulled a rolled up newspaper out of his belt and struck me on the chest with it. When I jumped back in surprise he reached up, his very long, hairy arm protruding from the leather sleeve, grabbed me by the lapel of my jacket, and turned my body so I was facing up the road. Then he went, "Ugh, ugh," and using the newspaper as a pointer, indicated Mr. Ignatz's driveway. "Ugh, ugh," he repeated. Clearly it was very important to him that my neighbor get the newspaper. When I didn't move to accomplish this right away he shook his head wearily, as though scolding himself for expecting me to understand. Suddenly his eyes rolled up into his head and he slumped down onto the ground unconscious. Just then a pickup truck with an elderly man and woman inside came around the corner, slowed as it passed the burning remains of the motorcycle, and then came to a full stop beside me.

"He needs a hospital fast," I said. I almost added, "a veterinary hospital," for I was becoming a bit unstuck. When was the last time an orangutan asked you to finish his paper route for him? The man got out and helped me lift the orangutan into the back of the truck, observing, "Damn ugly feller, even for a biker."

"You get him help," I said. "I'll call the state police and report the accident."

As the truck pulled away I stood there, examining the newspaper the cyclist had thrust into my hand. It was the bulldog edition of the next day's New York *Times,* the one you can pick up after ten-thirty the night before. It was folded open at the obituary page. A small item at the bottom was circled with a colored marker and an

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exclamation point placed beside it in the margin. The headline read, "IGNATIUS, ZOO ORANGUTAN, 57," and went on to say: "The Central Park Zoo has announced the death of one of its most popular animals, the orangutan Ignatius, the oldest of his kind in captivity, who passed away in his sleep after an illness of several weeks earlier this evening. Zoo officials say they hope to replace Ignatius with his cousin Ignatz, currently part of a private menagerie in Pennsylvania."

The flashlight went from dim to dimmer. I switched it off and stood there in the roadside darkness considering this strange turn of events. For suddenly I had remembered what the strange yet familiar smell had been back at the Hollowells. It had been that most unnatural smell of all, the smell of zoo. I knew it well. The fact is, I'd known old Ignatius, the orangutan, from my New York days and was beholden to him.

I'd been trying to make a living writing and illustrating children's books, working out of our apartment on the West Side. My first two efforts hadn't set the world on fire and both Helen and I were happy she'd kept her job managing the book store. In my business, they say you blame the failure of your first book on the publisher, the second on the parents, and the third on the kids. And once you've soured on the kids you're kind of washed up in children's books. So I had a lot riding on number three. *Polliwog Breakfast* would introduce my readers to Mrs. Muscovia Waddell as she leads her crocodile of eleven little ducklings on a morning excursion down to a rock pool stocked with polliwogs along the river bank. I liked what I had. But the talk around Teddy B.'s, the bar near the Central Park Zoo where the children's books people hung out, said ducks and ducklings were history and hippos were in. (Cleopatra, the hippo in the zoo, and her beau Radames, a loaner from the Syracuse Zoo, had apparently hit it off. The book trade was counting on the union being blessed with issue in time for the Christmas shopping season. For months now, author/illustrators with sketch books had been crowding the hippo house.) I hoped the talk was wrong but I have to say I was worried.

In times of stress I found it calmed my nerves to go to the zoo and stand near the orangutan cage. It was customary for a very fine mature male named Ignatius to occupy the place of honor, a rubber tire hanging down from a metal rafter close to the bars. Ignatius always seemed perfectly at home as he swung from side to side, now and then grabbing the bars with articulate hands and feet that

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seemed gloved in the finest leather. The animal's close-set, peaceful eyes stared out at the world from inside the pebbly leather Mother Hubbard of his cheekpads and pronounced forehead. His lips were long, fine, and noble. In fact, it was clear from his majestic bearing and the way the other orangutans deferred to him that Ignatius was special. Privately I nicknamed him King of the Orangutans.

Others must have found Ignatius a soothing presence, too, for there was usually a small crowd around the cage. But I had not noticed until this particular day that there seemed to be a kind of line of people waiting near the bars. When their turn came, each would step up to the place right in front of Ignatius and stand there somewhat, it seemed to me, like petitioners. Then after a minute or two, downcast or smiling from ear to ear, they would move on, making way for the next in line. I was so interested in my discovery that I moved closer to the cage, where a tall, well-dressed black man with a Pan-Africa flight bag on his arm stood at the bars. (I had already noticed that many of Ignatius's visitors carried flight bags of exotic airlines and had concluded that foreigners had few chances to see orangutans.) When the man stepped away I thought I saw Ignatius motion for a small oriental woman to approach. But she turned to me. "I think this gentleman is next," she said.

Ignatius gave me a frank and amiable look and gestured me forward with both long forearms outside the bars. I only hesitated a moment before stepping within his grasp. I could tell the animal was intrigued by my red hair and beard, which were almost the same color as his shaggy fur. He waited patiently. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do now. But since the others had looked like petitioners, I asked myself what it was I wanted most. Clearly I wanted *Polliwog Breakfast* to be a success. So I stood there, looked Ignatius in the eyes, and laid out the story of my book in my mind for him to read. He seemed amused by my picture of Muscovia and her young ones setting off on their journey down to the river. He set his elbow on top of his head in alarm at their near capture by the Raccoon Gang. He rejoiced with little shrieks and hoots at their escape. Afterward he dismissed my worries about the hippo books with a wave of his wrist. (As it happened, Cleopatra wasn't pregnant at all. Radames was sent back to Syracuse in disgrace. And hippo books were that year's glut on the Christmas market.) Then I heard a gentle voice in my head say, "Go in peace. And try to be a better person." Ignatius's smiling eyes moved past my shoulder to the little oriental lady and I knew my interview was over.

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Polliwog Breakfast sold well enough when it first came out, but it was hardly a roaring success. Then in late October, during an interview on *Sixty Minutes* the President's wife quoted my Muscovia Waddell in reference to some international crisis or other, adding that her grandchildren could each expect to find *Polliwog Breakfast* in their Christmas stockings. After that they couldn't print the thing fast enough and I've been turning out Muscovia Waddell books ever since. I thought about going back to thank Ignatius but I never did. I told myself I'd made a pact with the gods to be a better person if my book succeeded, a promise made with an orangutan as my witness, that was all. Later I got rid of the gods and the orangutan and wrote the whole thing off as luck. Talent? Sure, you've got to have talent, I'd tell everybody. But it isn't worth a damn if you don't have luck.

Suddenly, as I stood there by the roadside in the dim light of the smoldering motorcycle, the truth hit me in a revelation powerful enough to unhinge the brain. Forget luck. Forget the gods. You make it in this world for one reason and for one reason alone: because the King of the Orangutans likes you and grants you success.

But here was the problem. Ignatius the old king was dead. And if there was one thing I was sure as hell of it was that his successor Mr. Ignatz did not like me one little bit. Me or my kind, whatever that meant. Was the world to be turned upside down? Were those Ignatius had given success to now to be laid low? And would our places be taken by Mr. Ignatz's people?

Over my dead body.

Yes, I decided on the spot to seize the day and take my fate in my own hands. I would kill Mr. Ignatz and do the deed tonight. Tomorrow an unknown orangutan in some third-rate zoo somewhere would wake up to the startling news that he was King of the Orangutans. Whoever he was, I couldn't imagine him disliking me as much as Mr. Ignatz did.

A plan must have already begun to take shape in my mind, for I reached down and picked up the cyclist's helmet. I left the road and hurried back home. On the way I passed the ruined stone wall where I'd fallen asleep and looked over, hoping to find myself still sitting there with my chin on my chest and the drink still within my grasp. But this was no dream.

The party was still going strong when I reached the house. My absence didn't seem to have been noticed. I caught a glimpse of Helen and Buck Hooper head to head in a corner of the living room

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as I climbed the stairs. In the bedroom closet I found my old navy-blue crushed-velvet jacket, put it on, and examined the result in the mirror. Yes, in the dark it just might pass for black leather. Then I tried on the motorcycle helmet. But here the effect was less satisfactory. I looked like a guy with a red beard whose headgear was a bit too big for him. I needed cheekpads. But I knew how to remedy that. On the way up to my attic studio I tore the insides out of the motorcycle helmet. Then I rummaged around in my prop box until I found an old leather football helmet I'd used for my first book, *The Four Horseflies of the Apocalypse,* about these insects who dreamed of playing football for Notre Dame. I put on the football helmet and then squeezed on the shell of the motorcycle helmet over that. The ear flaps of the football helmet pushed out from under the hard plastic like cheekpads. The effect wasn't that bad. It was a dark night. I just might get away with it.

Unlocking a filing-cabinet drawer, I took out the automatic I'd picked up in righteous indignation after getting mugged on the street way back in the days before I joined the ranks of Ignatius's white-haired boys. But I'd never been able to bring myself to walk around with the damn thing. I'd never even fired it. Now I slammed in the clip and, praying it would work, I stuck the weapon in my waistband and buttoned my jacket. Then I stood at the drawing board and looked at the last of the illustrations for my latest Mrs. Waddell adventure. In *Fireflies Before Bedtime,* she takes her ducklings out for a late snack under the stars. I'm doing this for you, too, Muscovia, I thought to myself.

Out on the lawn again, I gave the noisy house one final look. I wouldn't come back here again. Not after I earned my paragraph in the orangutan history books. No, this would be the first place Mr. Ignatz's people would look. I imagined the motorcycles roaring in the gate and up the steps onto the porch and in through the front door. I heard the guests' terror as the hooting and screaming orangutans wheeled about inside smashing faces and furniture, venting their rage on the successful, on the followers of King Ignatius, one of whom had killed their beloved Prince Ignatz. I imagined them gunning their bikes and roaring up the stairs. I imagined Helen and Buck, too drunk with passion to hear the approaching thunder. In my mind's eye I saw their naked bodies being hurled from the bedroom window.

No, I wouldn't go home. I'd wander along the road with a plastic garbage bag collecting aluminum cans like a derelict as the motorcy-

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cles rushed by scouring the countryside for me. Then, when Mr. Ignatz's successor had restored order, Mrs. Waddell and I would come out of hiding and begin our adventures again.

A sudden increase of traffic on the road in front of the house reminded me that the obituary had mentioned a long illness. Perhaps the orangutans were gathering in anticipation of Ignatius's death. Time for me to get started.

I reached the place the back way, the way I'd come that first time. God knows how I found the old road in the dark. I saw Hollowell at the top of the driveway directing traffic with a flashlight. His wife was tending a picnic table loaded down with bushel baskets of mixed fruit. Lights under the eaves of the long, low cinder-block building illuminated the scene as figures I now knew to be orangutans rather than men moved among the motorcycles and vans. Crouching down, I ran carefully until I reached the dark side of the building and hurried through the shadows to the far end. I meant to make some kind of diversion, maybe a fire in an outbuilding, to draw off the orangutans. Then I'd shoot Mr. Ignatz and make my escape. That was my plan. But when I risked a quick look around the corner, I discovered two orangutans in black leather jackets standing guard at the door, one studying a pocket chessboard, the other staring up at the starry sky with his chin in his hand.

Before I could get up enough nerve to swagger right on by and over to the outbuildings, I heard the roar of a motorcycle in the driveway. Orangutans rushed from the picnic table and the parking area to greet its arrival with joyful noises. Daring another look around the corner, I saw the two guards had joined the crush around the new arrival, who was waving a newspaper. Of course they'd have sent more than one messenger to make sure the news got through.

Here was my chance. I drew the automatic and stepped through the unguarded doorway. A large orangutan was standing alone at a window watching the excitement. Letting the curtain fall back into place, he gave a grim smile and crossed with a stately step to the large rubber tire which hung from the ceiling on a silver chain. He threw a long arm over the top of the tire and, striking a pose appropriate to the occasion, he faced the door through which his followers would come to declare him the new King of the Orangutans. When Mr. Ignatz saw me his lip curled with contempt and loathing. But my weapon made him wary. I knew I had very little

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time. I stepped forward and, holding the automatic with both hands, I aimed it at his chest. I was astonished at how much I hated the creature. He showed no fear, I'll give him that. He released the tire and took a step toward me, as if wondering if he could disarm me by force of character alone. My knees were trembling as if they were afraid he might be right. I was just about to pull the trigger when the happy crowd of orangutans burst through the door pushing the new messenger ahead of them. The smiling Hollowells followed in behind them, faithful retainers happy at their master's new rank.

The orangutans stopped and grew solemn when they saw me. Then several of the larger ones started forward, but I waved them back with the automatic. Mr. Ignatz was halfway into a lunge when I turned the gun back on him. He stopped, straightened up, and watched me with calculating eyes. Needing a clear path to the door to make my escape after I shot him, I held the automatic in one hand and used the other to motion the orangutans and the Hollowells around until they were standing behind Mr. Ignatz. As the sullen orangutans obeyed me they grunted, hooted, shrieked, and gesticulated at Mr. Ignatz. Whatever it was they were saying made him very angry. He stamped his feet and roared back at them. I decided to cut the whole thing short and tightened my sweaty grip on the automatic. But before I could pull the trigger, all the orangutans behind Mr. Ignatz went down on one knee. I thought they were begging for his life. But their cries and groans were directed at him, not me. Mr. Ignatz roared again, shook his hands in despair, and beat the rubber tire with angry fists. Then all of a sudden he sagged and went down on one knee too, averting his eyes. The other genuflecting orangutans looked at me with sad, resigned faces. Hollowell began to blubber like a baby. His stoical wife stared at the floor.

At last I understood. The ways of the orangutans are strange, almost as strange as fate itself. Somewhere among their ancient laws, it must be written that their king may trade his throne for his life.

So there you are. I am Inigo, King of the Orangutans. I swing back and forth on the Treaded Throne, master of all I survey.

Alone and warming his five wits,
The red ape in the truck tire sits.

But not quite alone, eh? Come closer. Come closer. Make your wish and I will grant whatever success it is you desire. Why not? I

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like you. I wish you well. That's reason enough. And you must wish me well, too. For when I die your success dies with me. And to be up front about it, the doctors say my health could be better. I'm puny for an orangutan, they say. And it's true I don't sleep as well as they tell me Ignatius did. You see, Mr. Ignatz and his people fled my court not long after the coronation. And now the highways of my dreams swarm with simian bikers and a plot hatches in every dark corner.

I sometimes think I should have shot Mr. Ignatz then and there and made my escape. As I said, whoever succeeded next to the Treaded Throne, he couldn't have hated me more than Mr. Ignatz did. But could I really be sure of that? And what if I was wrong? So I decided to become King of the Orangutans myself. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't.

DETECTIVERSE

COPY CAT

by JANET BLAIR DOMINICK

There once was a man named McFee
Who exclaimed, "A James Bond I will be!"
But when Goldfinger showed
Poor McFee hit the road—
He was only a double O three!

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MINUTE MYSTERY

LINEUP

by TED CARROLL

With the concentration of a Boy Scout determined to help an old lady cross the street, Byron followed the frail old man with the red-tipped white cane.

Man and cane turned a corner.

Byron assessed the deserted side street and nearby subway entrance, then shot forward yelling, "Get outta da way," in heavy Brooklynese, bumping the frail man off balance as his skilled fingers extracted wallet from breast pocket. Byron dashed on into the subway, darting onto a train just pulling away.

Taking a seat, he silently applauded himself on his inspiration to concentrate on the blind—plenty of 'em in a big city—eliminating fear of the police lineup which had once nailed him. Nobody could ever identify his voice. For, while Byron had failed as an actor, he had learned to mimic accents.

Leaving the subway, Byron bought a *Variety*. A headline jumped out: MARCUS MANHEIM—Byron's favorite actor—OPENS NEW PLAY.

A policeman tapped Byron's shoulder. A few minutes later he was in a paddy wagon taking a ride to the station and a lineup.

Byron laughed: Today's victims had heard a Brooklyn accent; he'd use his Georgia drawl.

But as he and four others stood in bright lights nobody was asked to say a word. Instead, Byron heard a shout: "That's him!"

A stunned Byron was led away, confused—until he read the interrupted *Variety* article:

". . . Manheim always lives the lives he'll portray on stage. This time a blind man—so with white cane he's walking city streets to get the feel . . ."

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Joseph Koenig's debut on the mystery scene with the novel Floater *earned him an Edgar Allan Poe Award nomination, and since then he has gone on to write two more novels (published by Viking Press). This first story for* EQMM *is unsentimental and tough . . .*

THE LAST SUPPER

by JOSEPH KOENIG

Tuesdays, when he began stinking like a race horse again, a prosthesis was tossed into Langston's cell and he was taken to the showers. He moved slowly on the artificial limb, his hand on a shoulder of the guard who went everywhere with him at those odd times when he was let out of the block. Although it had taken considerable getting used to, it was not the wood leg that hobbled him. Poor circulation had caused the gangrene to spread to his other leg, which was rotten to the knee. He was blind in one eye, and could see little more than shadow with the good one. A jailhouse lawyer had advised him that if they didn't fry him at the end of the month, he had a case against the corrections department for medical treatment to replace every part of his body.

Langston was allowed three minutes under the tepid spray before he turned in the thin bar of brown soap for a threadbare towel and, dripping wet, was led back through the raucous galleries to the condemned cell where he had been installed after his appeal was rejected. Death Row held no fear for him. The quiet of the block was a vacation from the bullshit that was piled in abundance upon the general population. Of his thirty-four years on earth, Langston had spent sixteen in various penitentiaries. He had done five years in Raiford, Florida, for bank robbery with a deuce tagged on for escape. Four years had been passed at Parchman Farm, Mississippi, consecutive two-year beefs for breaking and entering in the nighttime, and possession of burglars' tools. He had done another five-spot at Angola Prison across the Mississippi River from New Orleans, and two more years in Brushy Mountain, Tennessee, for an armed robbery which he insisted was a case of mistaken identity on the part

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of three eyewitnesses. Florida wanted him back to do ninety-nine years for the murder of a Hialeah race track parimutuel clerk. Langston also maintained his innocence of that crime, but did not see that it mattered. Florida could not have its piece of him until he had completed his sentence in Georgia. And the sentence in Georgia was for him to die in the electric chair.

Langston had been arrested on De Renne Avenue, in Savannah, while carrying sixty-seven thousand new fifty-dollar bills bundled in Federal Reserve wrappers. Exiting a savings and loan across the street were his brother, Eldred, and Lee Moore, an AWOL marine from Parris Island, South Carolina, with an IQ of eighty-eight, whom Eldred had struck up a friendship with in a topless bar the night before. Inside the bank was a thirty-seven-year-old teller, Jane Moody, whom Lee Moore had shot through the head, throat, heart, and both lungs with a twelve-gauge Remington pump gun for no good reason the Langston brothers ever saw. Eldred had copped a plea to a forty-five year sentence rather than rat out his brother to the Savannah district attorney. In exchange for a ten-year term, however, Lee Moore had told prosecutors everything they wanted to hear about the bank robbery, plus other things he had made up as he went along. And so Langston found himself on Death Row for another killing he claimed he didn't do, although conceding that he was not entirely blameless in regard to the events leading up to it.

Langston's gripe was that he would not be in prison now had his eyesight not begun to fail. "If I could see good as always," he had told Eldred while awaiting sentencing, "I'd've spotted right off what a dumb bastard that Lee Moore was and put him out of his misery before he put us in ours."

Langston's vision had deteriorated steadily behind bars, but he did not complain. He had been resident in enough jails to have a good idea of what they looked like, and to know that he was not missing much. He did not care to know that in the Georgia State Penitentiary at Alto, the four condemned cells were situated at the end of a Death Row that was home to sixty-seven men. Since the next date with the electric chair was his, Langston's cell was closest to the execution chamber, less than forty feet away from the gray steel door. All the cells were on the same wall, separated by cinder-block dividers, and each of the doomed inmates kept a small mirror on hand to peer into the corridor to see what was going on. Almost never was anything going on.

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The man in the cell nearest to Langston's was Vern Little Cannon, twenty-seven, a career criminal who had slain three DeKalb County deputies during a botched robbery of a suburban Atlanta convenience store. Cannon was scheduled to go to the electric chair two weeks after Langston.

"The one pleasure I have to look forward to," he said to Langston on the eve of the bank robber's execution date, "is living long enough to see you burn. It'll keep me in high spirits till my number's up."

"You won't see a thing," Langston said.

Cannon tilted his mirror into the corridor, framing the door to the death chamber in the smudged glass.

"I'll hear it, though. It's the same thing. Better even, 'cause I'll keep the sound of it forever." He slipped a small cassette recorder through the bars for Langston to see. "I'm gonna love hearing you scream when they throw the switch."

"Won't be nothing to hear either," Langston said.

"Gonna crash out?" Cannon laughed at his own joke. "The great escape artist gonna strap on his peg leg like it was a wing, and fly out over the walls? Ain't humanly possible to beat Death Row. To my knowledge it's never been done nowhere, 'specially not in Georgia, 'specially not by a blind, one-legged bank robber. They been putting downs in your food, Langston, in case you didn't know it, make you nice and drowsy for when it's time to ride old sparky. You ask me, you started dreaming."

"They can't kill me. It's out of their hands."

"Those pills've made you whacky," Cannon said. "Appeals Court turned you down four times. Ain't nothing left for your lawyer to try."

Langston did not have to be reminded of the fact, and did not appreciate that Cannon wouldn't let him forget. "Don't matter," he said. "I won't burn."

"Hear that?" Cannon shouted into the corridor. "He's scared out of his skull."

Cannon swept his mirror along the block. Someone he could not see, someone who sounded like Bullock—the black guy from New Jersey, so surly that no one ever talked to him—said, "Shut up, and let the man enjoy the time he has in peace."

"Who asked you?" Cannon said.

"If it wasn't going to be my pleasure to hear your brains sizzle," Bullock answered, "I'd find a way in your cell and wring that pencil neck of yours."

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Cannon, trying to laugh insolently, made a choked, guttural sound.

"Save it, Bullock," Langston said. "This is close as I come to the chair."

"You know," the black man said, "I could be persuaded that Mr. Cannon has a point. Georgia is going to legally murder you, come the A.M., no two ways about it. I was you, I'd give some serious thought to my future, such future as I have, and maybe work up a good sweat praying."

"I've given it all the thought it requires," Langston said. "The state is not going to kill me. Period."

"What'd I tell you?" Cannon gloated. "He's losing his grip. Next thing, he'll say he's a rubber man and don't conduct electric."

"We'll see which one of us don't know what he's talking about," Langston said. "You're so sure they're gonna fry me, put your money where your mouth is. If I'm executed, you can have everything in my cell. Otherwise, it costs you two thousand bucks. What do you say to that?"

Cannon laughed. "What've you got in there I'd even want?"

Langston surveyed the confines of his eight-by-twelve-foot cage. In the half-shadows he could make out little detail. The walls had seemed to thicken as his eyesight faded, so that the space in which he had spent the past four months might have been two feet wide by three feet, with soft, fuzzy sides that hardened when he stumbled on his bad leg and crashed against them. "My TV," he said.

"I got a TV."

"It's a Sony Trinitron with a twenty-six-inch screen and stereo headset. You can also have my short-wave radio, all my beaver books, six cases of Diet Coke, and four cartons of Marlboros."

"It's not a lot. Ain't worth nowheres near two grand. I could buy it all on the outside for under five hundred bucks."

"But it's *here,*" Langston said. "Don't matter what's available on the street, when you can't get your hooks on it. The stuff's sitting on Death Row."

"What's the proposition?" Cannon asked cautiously.

"I go to the chair, you get all my stuff. For any reason I don't, you send two thousand bucks to my ex-wife in Augusta. She's hard up against it. Lawyers took every cent I had."

"It's a sad story," Cannon said. "Only, how am I gonna collect when it gets sadder?"

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"Bullock'll let the guards know to move my things into your cell if you win. I ain't around, I trust him to see to it you pay up. You two still go to the showers together, don't you?"

When Cannon didn't answer, Bullock shouted into the corridor, "This is getting interesting, man. What you say?"

Cannon's voice was strained, the braggadocio artificial as he blurted, "You got a deal. What the hell? It's a sure thing. Nobody cheats old sparky."

"We'll find out," Langston said.

"Yeah," Bullock said, "won't we?"

At six, Myron Campbell, the guard who kept as close to Langston as a valet, came into the cell to talk to the prisoner who was due to be executed one minute after midnight. "It's a custom here, Langston, as you know, that a condemned man can have anything he wants for his final meal so long as he keeps the bill under ten dollars, and don't ask for alcohol. I'm here to take your order. I don't want you ordering no pheasant under glass with a jug of champagne to wash it down, is what I'm saying."

Langston licked his lips, and his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. "Tell the truth," he said, "what I had my heart set on all the time I been in stir is a hot fudge chocolate sundae with plenty of whipped cream and chopped nuts and a maraschino cherry on the top."

"Sounds good to me."

Langston smiled. "Make it two."

"That takes care of dessert," the guard said. "What about the main course?"

"The other thing I been missing is seven-layer chocolate cake. Bring me a couple pieces. And some New York-style cheesecake, while you're at it."

"That's not my idea of a well-balanced meal," Campbell said.

"I can't say I need a lot of vitamins, what I got to look forward to. Ice cream and cake'll do me fine."

"You sure don't have to bother about your diet, where you're going," Campbell said.

"Do *you* know where I'm going?" Langston looked blackly at the guard. " 'Cause it seems premature to tell." He dragged a case of diet Coca-Cola out of a corner. "Bullock can have these after I'm gone. What I want to taste one more time is some A&W root beer. And not the diet kind."

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Campbell jotted the order in the air with his finger. "Coming right up," he said.

Langston ate his final meal alone. Campbell had wanted to remain in the cell to share in the feast and to chat about the weekend series between the Atlanta Braves and the Montreal Expos, but Langston was uncharacteristically edgy, and asked to be by himself. Around eight, when the guard came for his tray, Langston would not look at him.

"How'd you like it?"

"It was okay," the condemned man said.

"Just okay?"

"Guess I wasn't hungry."

"Well, your appetite couldn't have been all shot 'cause you damn well polished off everything."

"Let me be," Langston said.

"There's a chaplain from the Christian fellowship," Campbell said, "wants to know if you'll see him. Says he's here to stay with you till they . . . well, you know, till as long as you like. Thought you might want to read from the Bible with him."

Langston got up from his bunk. With his fingertips against the wall, he hobbled around the four corners of his cell, keeping his back to the guard. "Tell him this is one soul that don't lack saving."

Campbell looked sadly at Langston's back. "It might put your mind to rest."

"What I think I'm gonna do," Langston said, "is take a nap and rest all of me."

At nine, when Campbell looked in on Death Row again, Langston was snoring fitfully in his bunk. An hour later, the prisoner was sleeping so soundly that Campbell scarcely could hear him breathe. It was eleven when Campbell came back again with a trusty who would be allowed into the cell to shave Langston's head preparatory to execution. Langston did not stir when the guard rattled the door, nor did he wake up when the men came inside.

"No use trying to hide," Campbell said. "Gotta do what's gotta be done."

Langston still did not move.

"Don't punk out on me," the guard said in exasperation. "I thought you was one of the hard boys, was gonna go with dignity."

For all the good it did, he might have been talking to the wall. "Son of a bitch," he said, and returned the barber to the block before coming back and letting himself inside Langston's cell. The con-

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demned man still had not moved. Campbell called his name, and when that did not rouse him, shook him by the shoulder. Langston rolled over onto his side and then toppled onto the floor. There was no expression on his face, barely any blood where his chin opened against the concrete.

The guard ran from Death Row without bothering to lock the condemned cell. Behind him he heard one of the men out of control with laughter. It was that black bastard Bullock, Campbell thought, but he was damned if he saw where the comedy was. He ran all the way to the guards' station and summoned the prison physician, Dr. Alexander Scott, whose job it would be to listen for Langston's heartbeat after the State had passed 2400 volts of electricity through his body and to pronounce him dead when he could not hear it any longer.

Scott, who was in his seventies, did not enjoy attending at executions. He had retired from general practice eight years before, but retained his position at the prison because he needed the money. He was paid a thousand dollars for every electrocution he lent his good name to, plus a stipend for attending to the emergency medical needs of the prisoners.

When the doctor entered the cell, Langston was sprawled on the floor where the guard had left him. The smell from his gangrenous leg was overpowering. In another cell Vern Little Cannon was raving at Bullock, who was laughing maniacally. Dr. Scott shut his ears as he knelt beside Langston. He hated to see a man die in a place like this, even a man who deserved it. And, no doubt about it, Langston was dead. Already his body had begun to cool. Dr. Scott looked at the bank robber's drawn features. In a corner of Langston's mouth was a brown smear that was sticky to the touch when he rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger.

"What's this?" he asked.

Campbell said, "Huh?" He looked down over the doctor's shoulder and said, "Must be frosting. From the cake he pigged out on."

"What cake?"

"You know," Campbell said brightly. "I asked him what he was having for his last supper, and he couldn't get his fill of chocolate. Anything to make your teeth ache, that's what he wanted. I asked him why he didn't eat nothing more substantial, but he—"

"You numbskull." Scott yanked off his stethoscope and stuffed it in his bag. What, he wondered, would the State do to a man his age who committed murder on Death Row? Due to the guard's incredible

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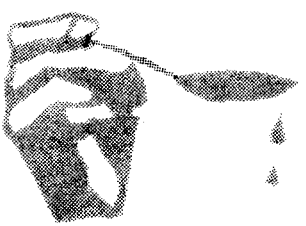
thickheadedness, he had lost an easy thousand dollars. "Didn't you know Langston had advanced diabetes? The poor bastard couldn't be in the same room with a lump of sugar that he wouldn't lapse into a diabetic coma. After he lost his appeal, he wouldn't let me inject him any more with insulin. Said he didn't see the sense in it; he was feeling like the rope in a tug of war. Feeding him chocolate, you killed him the same as if you put a gun to his head and curled his finger around the trigger."

Campbell stood up straight, and then he shrugged. "Nobody told me nothing."

Two cells away, Bullock was having another fit of laughter.

"Shut up in there," Campbell said. "Show a little respect for the dead."

Bullock didn't hear him as his howls echoed off the cinder walls. "Pay up," he shouted to Cannon. "Pay the man's wife, or I'll see to it you don't live long enough for Georgia to kill you neither."



DETECTIVERSE

IT DEZERVD IT!

by JEFFERSON HIDWELL

I wuz tierd ov rules
Andd the urrge had ben welleen,
So I fawlowed mi wish
Annd murderd al spelin!

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

William Bankier's mystery stories never follow a conventional line. His unusual talent is seen to best advantage when he gets hold of a preposterous premise and follows it with unwavering convincingness down a number of unsuspected byways, as in this tale of a young man seemingly visited by the sins of his father . . .

MY LIFE AS A DEAD MAN

by WILLIAM BANKIER

I left my mother's house in Fettle Lane at eight o'clock in the morning and headed for Sloane Square Underground Station. A man waiting alone at the bus stop was watching me. His grey suit looked new but it was cheap and did not fit his lanky body very well. As I came closer, I sensed trouble, but it was happening too quickly for me to do anything but press on.

"Are you Timothy Pullman?" He spoke with some kind of accent.

"Yes."

"I knew your father."

"Really?"

A double-decker bus was approaching the stop. "So when I kill you soon," the man said, "you'll understand why." He vaulted onto the platform at the rear end of the bus and clattered up the winding stairway. As the bus pulled away, I saw his pale face peering back at me from a window on the upper level.

My father has been dead for eleven years. Contrary to what the stranger said, I had no idea why he would want to kill me. The idea was so bizarre, the threat so unexpected, it suggested a case of mistaken identity. And yet the man had used my name.

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My head was still spinning when I reached the underground platform and began waiting for a Circle Line train to take me to Lancaster Gate. I am the son of Burgess Pullman, a broadcast journalist from Montreal. He was not an outstanding man, not a famous man. In Montreal, he was employed by television station CFCF. He was one of those people who appear on screen, head and shoulders, after the studio anchor person introduces the story and then says, "This report from Burgess Pullman." Three years before the start of my time on the planet, he emigrated to London. He was eligible to live and work here because his father had been born in Glasgow. His career in London was as a writer/producer of radio documentary programs for the BBC. Eleven years ago, when I was seventeen, Burgess Pullman died of a common, garden-variety heart attack.

But as my train approached, heralded by distant thunder and a wavering light in the tunnel, I had to concede something. My father was a mysterious man. Not in the sense of gliding out of dark doorways wearing a cape. But he had never said much to me about his life in Montreal. Which explains why, in my early twenties, I travelled there and went to look at my father's house. And wrote a poem about the experience.

As for the stranger with his promise to kill me—could not his accent be French-Canadian?

At Lancaster Gate station, declining to wait among the zombies for a molasses-powered elevator, I ran up the stairway and emerged on Bayswater Road. My part-time job lay across the street in Kensington Gardens where I was employed with a crew paid by the Borough to tend the lawns, the shrubs, the flowers. It was satisfying work, my nostrils filled with the musk of marigolds and the scent of freshly cut grass. And plenty of time for a poet's mind to roll on, unencumbered.

But ponder as I would that morning, I could not get a handle on the situation. One thing I knew for certain, I would never mention it to my mother. Margaret Pullman had enough on her mind these days, waiting for the results of her biopsy. More than likely the tumor would be benign. But the attempted good cheer between us recently was evidence of our fear that it might turn out otherwise.

Suzi Whitfield was somebody I could discuss anything with, short of inadequate batting by the English cricket side. And, as luck would have it, I had a date for lunch with Suzi in The Grapes on Kensington High Street.

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I was there first, washed up and settled behind my pint of Courage when she came in through the open doorway and stood, legs apart, coat held back by fists on hips. Her head tossed as it turned, so the clever cut threw blonde hair across her pale blue eyes. She saw me, gave a thumbs-up, and went to the bar.

No use my getting up and trying to buy Suzi a drink. On matters of paying her way, she was insistently feminist. She was also a terrible companion, according to my mother, who saw Suzi as a waste of my time, if not a threat to my future happiness. This because Suzi lived in Parson's Green with an aunt who looked after Suzi's four-year-old daughter, Keitha. Compounding the untidy situation was a husband named Hugo who kept threatening to show up.

We ran into Hugo one night when I was delivering Suzi home in a taxi after dinner and a cinema. He was lurking outside the house with the collar turned up on his Manchester United windbreaker, hair in his eyes, hands thrust inside his pockets. "You decided to come home." He was quite drunk.

"You're not supposed to be here, Hugo." Suzi had no fear of him, unlike me. "The court order says not within five hundred yards."

"Then you'll have to run away, won't you."

I had to say something. "We don't want any trouble."

He moved towards me, his chest bullied against me. He kept on coming, treading on the toes of my shoes, forcing me to stumble backwards off balance.

Suzi let go one high-pitched, whistling screech. She swung her handbag, bouncing it off the side of his head. "Stop it, Hugo!" He stopped. "Get out of here."

"I just want to see my family," he said in a mocking tone.

"You don't care a damn about your family," she said. "Go before I call the police."

Now, when Suzi carried her drink from the bar and sat beside me, she was full of silly vignettes about her clientele at the salon called Scissors on the King's Road in Chelsea. I revelled in her company, the cachet of being with the sharpest woman in the pub.

At last I was able to say, "Tell me what you think of this." Then I went on to describe my encounter that morning at the bus stop in Fettle Lane.

She listened behind a serious frown, taking abrupt sips from her glass of gin. When I finished, she said, "Will you tell your mum?"

"What could she do?"

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"She might know something more about your father's life in Montreal. Explaining why this bloke has a grievance."

We went to the counter and came back with plates of sausages and mashed potatoes with Brussels sprouts and slabs of buttered bread. As we began eating, Suzi said, "No use telling the police."

"I suppose not. They can't act unless a crime has been committed. This is a vague threat from a stranger. They aren't liable to put a guard on me."

"Cheer up, it may never happen," my friend concluded. "He's a nut case. You won't ever see him again."

But I did. When I arrived home after work at half-past five, the faded man in the cheap grey suit was sitting in my favorite chair in our living room while my mother served him tea and small sandwiches with the crusts cut off.

"Tim, this is Christophe Soubliere from Montreal." My mother was more cheerful, more alive, than I had seen her in months. "He worked with your father. We've been having the most wonderful chat."

I could only shake the man's hand and accept a cup of tea. Soubliere was charming. Could I have been mistaken about what he had said that morning? He caught me up now on what had gone on before my arrival. He had been a Detective-Sergeant with the Montreal Police. Having been ill, he had taken early retirement. His contact with Burgess Pullman began when my father did a TV profile of a week in the life of a Montreal cop. They spent many hours together, establishing a friendship which continued after the program was completed.

"He was with me," Soubliere recounted, "when I arrested one of the toll-takers from the Jacques Cartier Bridge. Automatic toll machines had been put in. Immediately, the take went up by thousands of dollars a week. It was obvious. The guards had been skimming a lot of money. This one owned two apartment buildings." The former detective smiled into space. "We had fun, your father and I."

Before taking his departure, Soubliere asked to use the bathroom. Alone with my mother, I whispered, "What is he doing here?"

"He's on vacation." She looked at me sharply; my mother does not miss much. "What's the matter?"

"It's so unexpected. How did he get our address?"

"You are becoming even more insular than Burgess used to be."

I walked the French-Canadian to the bus stop. Outside, in the setting of our first encounter, the civilized wrapping fell away, re-

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vealing the man as tense and suspicious. I asked him, "Did I hear you wrong this morning?"

"About killing you? No, I have been planning revenge for years. All the time I was forced to rot in prison. While your father spent the money that was rightfully mine."

"Prison? But you're a policeman."

"They put cops in prison."

There was no bus in sight. He sat on the bench under the rain shelter. I stood behind him with my back against a glass panel. "Since you came all the way from Canada, you'd better tell me what my father did to you."

"It is not hard to understand. There was a drug bust. I was in charge. In addition to many kilos of cocaine, we found money. Three million dollars in used bills. I took three hundred thousand." Soubliere seemed to assume my condemnation. He went ahead to justify himself. "It is common practice. Police officers take the risks, do the work, put their lives on the line. These huge pools of cash come into our hands. What are we to do?"

"Turn it in?" I suggested.

"When we do that, it is drained off by our superiors. What remains is fed into the bureaucratic process where much of it is wasted." Soubliere glanced at me. I had not noticed until that moment that the man was handsome. The tired eyes, slate grey, were widely spaced above a long, sharp nose. The hawkish expression suggested there had once been strength in what was now a dissipated face. "I truly believed," he concluded, "that I had a right to my share of that money."

"What happened?"

"Burgess Pullman was a good investigative reporter. And remember, we were friends. We drank together, often late into the night. He charmed his way into my confidence. He found out about the money. He discovered from me where it was being kept. Then your father did two things. He lifted most of the cash. And he turned in evidence, including tape recordings of our conversations, that led to my arrest. There was a trial. I was found guilty and sent away for thirty-five years. I was released six months ago, after serving more than thirty years."

I sat down. I was saddened, embarrassed, horrified by the actions of my father. "How did you trace me here?"

"My cop connections kept working after I went inside. I learned Pullman moved to London. I was told he married and fathered a child. I learned about his death."

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"My father was the one who turned you in. And he's been dead for all this time. Why come after me?"

"Thirty years of confinement, the best part of my life, and it's gone." Soubliere got to his feet. His eyes were on a bus approaching some distance away. "You think I'm crazy to want a payback?" The hawk's eyes pinned me. "Okay, I'm crazy."

This was an eerie experience for me. I was standing on a quiet Chelsea street being told about my impending murder by a man who seemed, otherwise, a reasonable individual. The truth was sinking in, and I had to admire the poetic nuance. For much of my life, I had been a dead man, waiting to pay the price for my father's sins.

The bus was rolling to a stop. As Soubliere climbed aboard, I called, "When?"

"When you least expect it." The engine roared as the bus pulled away. My killer stood with one arm looped around the upright pole, feet braced for balance. I could not hear his final words; I had to read his lips. "Don't worry," he seemed to say.

There was a second bus not a hundred yards behind the first. I waved the driver to a stop and got on board. I paid the conductor maximum fare and took a seat where I would be able to witness Soubliere's descent from the bus ahead.

My mother might worry. But I felt I had to find out where the retired policeman was living. If there was to be an encounter between us, the information might be helpful.

I am not without inner resources. I've been around. I could have attended a good university. The money was there and my high-school grades were adequate. Instead, at age eighteen, I decided to further my education in the real world. My parents had always observed a policy of laissez faire where I was concerned. So my recently widowed mother partly financed my four-year tour of Canada and the western United States. The rest of the money I earned in a series of jobs from hotel clerk to bartender to stocking shelves in a supermarket. And I wrote poetry. There was always a notebook in my pack, pages filled with scrawl on both sides.

I stayed only three days in Montreal, in a hostel near McGill University. From there, when I had fortified myself with an evening of drinking in the Old Town, I rode in a taxi to the district where Burgess Pullman used to live. My mother had remembered the address from some ancient conversation, and I had written it down.

I walked slowly past the house, only glancing at it. Then, returning along the other side of the street, I stopped and allowed the

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echoes of the place to enter my soul. It was a white stucco dwelling with a facade that included a vertical panel of curved glass brick in the 1920s style. There were three Chinese elms, trimmed round, on either side of the front walk. I could see the tips of poplar trees in the back yard rising above a flat roof. The front door was painted blue.

I spent no more than ten minutes on that quiet street. Then, during the cab ride back into the city, I wrote in my notebook the first lines of the poem that would be entitled "My Father's House":

> I have opened the pale blue door,
> Allowed it to burst open
> And, bracing myself against the force of the unknown,
> I have heard the insistent roar
> Of what may never have been—
> Burned to the bone by hesitant memories of him.

The London bus ahead of mine pulled in to a stop where Christophe Soubliere stepped down. I snatched at the bell cord. Out on the street, I was in time to see the French Canadian disappearing into the shadows of a narrow lane.

We were in the district of Earl's Court. Shuttered shops lined either side of the main road as far as the lighted blue-and-red circle outside an underground station. The lane Soubliere had entered, and down which I now followed him, was filled with Edwardian mansions converted to boarding houses. He used a key to open a door midway along and went inside.

I was unsure of what to do next. I memorized the house number. I made a mental note of the street name. This was probably the man's residence; he would be unlikely to visit someone at this hour. Very good, I now knew where my murderer lived. What good would the information do me?

Minutes later, as I was returning to the bus stop, a taxi rounded the corner and drove to the house Soubliere had just entered. Somebody climbed out, paid the driver through his window, and the cab made a U-turn and sped away. It was only then that I recognised the woman who hurried to the rooming house door, used a key to open it, and went inside.

It was Suzi Whitfield!

When I got home, my mother was in bed, but the light was on and she was not asleep. "What kept you?"

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"I should have called but I couldn't find a telephone. I saw Soubliere home on the bus. He's an interesting man."

This comment cheered her. "I hope I see him again. It's such a relief to have somebody to talk to."

"I'm doing my best, Mother. I have to work."

"You'd rather spend your time with that middle-aged hairdresser."

"She's thirty-one years old."

"Anybody who wears that much makeup is hiding something."

I went down the hall to my room, feeling guilty. Mother was right, I had always avoided spending time with her. Was this insularity something inherited or learned from my father? Spending four years overseas instead of attending university could well have been an escape from the responsibility of caring for my bereaved parent. Which may explain more than one wandering poet. Still, I can only be what I am.

As I lay down to sleep, I wondered if Christophe Soubliere would allow me to be anything for very much longer. And the other, bigger question gnawed at me like a trapped animal. What was Suzi Whitfield's connection with the dangerous stranger?

I telephoned her at the shop, midmorning. It was one of my days off from labouring in the gardens. We were not scheduled to meet that day; Suzi sounded surprised to hear from me. Her response was guarded.

"Are you able to talk?"

"We're busy."

"I have to see you. Something's happened."

"Your mother?"

"No. We must talk. Have lunch with me."

"I'm not sure."

"I'll come there and collect you. We'll go next door to the wine bar."

On my way out of the house, I went into the sitting room, where my mother was laying out a hand of solitaire on the polished cherrywood table by the window. "You're off then?" she said, placing a red nine on a black ten, turning up a red three.

"Doing some writing." I swung my notebook into view, pen securely tucked into the spiral binding. "Any word on your test results?"

"Thanks for reminding me. I'd managed at last to put it out of my mind. I'm to ring Dr. Braine tomorrow." Cards were shifted swiftly,

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purposefully. I felt committed to watching this game to its conclusion. "Will you be seeing Mr. Soubliere?" she asked.

"I've no reason to."

"Perhaps he'll come round again this afternoon." The card she needed was hopelessly buried and we both knew it. "Don't feel you have to hang about," my mother told me.

I took my time walking to Sloane Square, where I read every word on each poster outside the Royal Court Theatre. I studied the photographs of the actors. They were a confident-looking bunch. The play was highly praised, a breakthrough by a young writer from the Midlands. True to my character, I experienced industrial-strength envy of his success.

I had almost an hour to kill. The pub next to the theatre had just opened. I went in and drank a pint of light ale, alone amid the comforting smells. I thought of writing down my feelings, but the cap never left my pen.

When I arrived at Scissors, Suzi was waiting outside the door. This was unusual; on other occasions I've had to discourage her from taking one more client.

"You look terrible," she said, leading the way along the pavement to the wine bar. "Let's go, I don't have long."

A waiter brought us a carafe of house red and, because we were in a hurry, the roast beef special. "I can tell something's wrong," Suzi said.

"I was in Earl's Court last night, keeping an eye on the man who's promised to kill me." I watched her face. She was not ready to respond. "I saw you drive up in a taxi. You went into his rooming house, Suzi. You're in cahoots with Christophe Soubliere."

She maintained a poker face. "That's true." Her control was beyond belief.

"How could you be a party to it? I'm to be murdered!"

"It's only a threat. To set you up. Please Tim, you must listen and try to understand. Soubliere is a French Canadian but he was never a policeman. He's a plumber."

I laughed at that. On my second glass of wine, my inhibitions were fading.

"He was at the salon this morning when you called, snaking a drain. He's probably around here someplace, watching us." Suzi seemed slightly uncomfortable, speaking of the man. "I made up the story," she went on, "from what little I knew about your father.

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Chris has been in London for years. He comes to the shop whenever we need work done."

"Go on."

"The idea was to put the fear in you. Then he would approach you and say he had reconsidered. That you don't deserve to die for your father's actions. But, having been separated from his money and sent to jail, Chris would feel he deserved to be reimbursed. Ten thousand pounds would be fair."

"Why do this to me?"

"Because I need the money. My husband is making more than a nuisance of himself. I think he may try to snatch Keitha. There's a town in Scotland I can go to, friends who can help me and my daughter get reestablished. But I need the money to make the move."

It sounded like the truth. Hugo was capable of making trouble. But I don't appreciate being messed about. "Why not just ask me?"

"You don't have the money."

"I'd have to get it from my mother in any case."

"You'd never hit on that woman for ten grand just to help me. Tell the truth. You'd only do it to save your own skin."

My food had no flavour. My glass was empty for the third time. I was feeling full to the brim with righteous indignation. The bar was jammed with people but I could not have cared less. "You filled my head with a dreadful story about my father," I complained. "I would have had to live with that."

"He probably did worse."

I got up fast, spilling food and drink on my companion. The side door was nearest and I went out that way, bursting into the restricted area of an alleyway. I was not alone. Christophe Soubliere appeared in the doorway, stepped down quickly, and blocked my escape route around a corner to the street. He must have been lurking in the crowd at the other end of the bar.

"It's Sergeant Soubliere of the Blocked Drains Division," I mocked him. "I'm not surprised."

"You aren't going to do anything crazy, are you? Like going to the police?"

"I think I will."

"Nothing was done to you."

"Trying to extort money by threat of murder? We'll see what they say about that."

"Your word against mine and Suzi's."

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"Let's try it on. I'm a citizen with a good reputation. You're an immigrant and she's a stranded mother with an unstable husband who's already given trouble."

"I'd rather you said nothing," Soubliere warned me. He took a gun from his jacket pocket. "They might send me back to Canada. I can't go back there. I have enemies in Montreal."

Sober, I might have gone on talking. But the wine had left me feeling aggressive. I seized wrist and gun with both hands. I twisted with all my strength. He fought back, but I had the advantage from moving first. I can't say who pulled the trigger. But the gun went off and Soubliere sagged against me. He went to his knees, then rolled onto his back. The gun was now in my hand.

"What have you done?" Suzi was watching from the doorway. She stepped down beside me, bent to examine Soubliere. "He's not dead. He's hit in the shoulder."

He was moaning and writhing. "I had no choice," I said.

"You've got to go in and call an ambulance. And we have to decide what to say."

"There's nothing to decide. The two of you were trying to extort money from me. He threatened me with a gun."

"Please don't, Tim. There's Hugo. If I get in trouble, he may end up with Keitha."

I was not sure whether that would happen or not. But if I went to court testifying against Suzi, the crazy husband might start thinking of me as his enemy. It was illogical, but Hugo had not struck me as a rational man. "Take the gun," I said, handing it over. "What will we tell the police?"

"That's easy. I have two boyfriends, you and Chris. He's jealous. He came here and called you outside. He had this gun. The two of you struggled."

"Will he support that?"

"You'll support that, won't you Chris?"

The wounded man was in pain. "Yes! For God's sake, get me some help."

I could not have predicted how things would turn out. Soubliere's wound was serious enough, but not life-threatening. The police were involved, of course. But neither I nor Suzi wanted to press charges. The weapon, unregistered, was a stumbling block. It looked for a time as if he would be fined and sent back to Canada. The magistrate, however, changed his mind when Margaret Pullman spoke on

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the accused's behalf. She and Mr. Soubliere were getting married. Not only would she pay for his fine, but she would guarantee his behaviour in future.

My mother was looking and sounding extremely well. The tumor had turned out benign and she was in top form. I thought I detected a hint of envy in the magistrate's eye when he dismissed the charges and set Christophe Soubliere free.

I gave the bride away. Outside the chapel after a modest but cheerful ceremony, I had a chance to speak to the French-Canadian. "How do we play this?" I asked him. "Will you be maintaining the fiction that you are a retired Montreal police officer?"

"Of course. That's how she knows me." Soubliere looked good in his new blue suit. "And when there is a fault in the household plumbing, I will prove to be handy."

There was one more problem. Suzi murmured, "I still need ten thousand pounds. Keitha and I really have to get away from Hugo."

I felt as if I was on a roll. "Leave that to me." Then, in the limousine on the way to the wedding dinner, I said, "Mother, I need some money."

"What for?"

"Suzi and I are going to live in Scotland. You and Chris certainly won't need me around the house."

"What will you be doing in Scotland?"

"Getting married, I expect." Suzi and I were holding hands, perched on the drop-seats facing the newlyweds. I looked to her for confirmation.

"I expect we will," she said, looking stunned.

"How much money are you talking about?" Mother asked.

"Ten thousand pounds."

"That's easy," she said. "There's more than that in the fund your father set up in your name. I never mentioned it because . . ." she searched for a reason ". . . I didn't feel like it. Anyway, you haven't needed it till now."

So Suzi and I and Keitha are off to Paisley. I've always liked Keitha and I think she likes me. I'll find work gardening and I'll try to do more writing. My wife should have no trouble styling Scottish hair.

It was typical of my father that he provided for me in this way and never bothered to tell me. And just as well that mother kept the fund a secret. I would have run through the money long before now. I might even be dead, instead of my life just beginning. ●

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DETECTIVERSE

ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

Here lies a hitman, David Stout,
Whose major talent was rubbing out
Whoever you wanted to turn up dead
With a thirty-eight-caliber hole in the head.
David was expert—a pro, of course,
A cold-blooded killer without remorse—
Who was equally willing to earn his fee
Whether his prey was a he or she.
So it happened one day that a jealous wife
Retained Dave Stout to deprive of life
A red-haired waitress named Alma May
Who was causing the lady's mate to stray.
The hitman soon tracked Alma down
And braced her at the edge of town
On a dark side street where the waitress dwelt
In a neighborhood that was far from svelte.
Alma May'd just come away
From her evening trick in the Sport Cafe
And was heading home for an early night
When hitman David hove in sight.
The street was dark—deserted, too—
No one would witness what he would do.
But the night was black, the light was poor,
So he paused a moment to be sure
That this was indeed the Alma May,
The red-haired gal from the Sport Cafe
Whom he'd been hired to blow away.
'Twas she, all right—then she heard him say,
"I guess this isn't your lucky day.
I'm going to kill you. Sorry, kid.
But you've got to pay for the thing you did."

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ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

And he drew his pistol, his thirty-eight,
And soon found out he was just too late,
For the second his tongue began to wag
Alma dipped into her shoulder bag
Where she always carried (the clever jade)
A heavy, razor-sharp switchblade,
And before Dave Stout could fire a shot
Her knife thunked home in a vital spot.
That's what *this* grave is all about:
When her knife went in, Dave Stout went out.

DETECTIVERSE

PLEA-SING BARGAIN

by DIXIE J. WHITTED

Bernie ratted on his friends;
(He's not their Valentine)
In one short year, his sentence ends;—
A snitch in time saved nine.

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a *NEW* short story by

ANTONIA FRASER

"Hogmanay": the traditional name given to the Scottish New Year's festivities, celebrated originally by children going from house to house gathering sweets. But for Jemima Shore, TV investigative journalist, her New Year's retreat to a Scottish castle is anything but a time of revelry, for before the New Year can be rung in, a member of the house party is murdered . . .

THE BOTTLE DUNGEON

by ANTONIA FRASER

"Quite rare nowadays, I believe," said Joss Benmuir, looking down beyond his feet at the black hole.

"It may be quite rare but it's absolutely horrible! Really, Joss, I fail to see how you can—" Lady Martin paused, then went on with fervour *"—tolerate* something so totally *foul."*

"It's not a human rights issue, Aunt May, at least not now." The intention of Robbie Benmuir was evidently to tease. May Martin was an extremely wealthy widow: since her husband's death she had occupied herself as an indefatigable campaigner for every conceivable liberal issue. Her figure was a familiar one, holding up a sandwich board of protest, spread across some newspaper.

Jemima Shore shivered as she too looked down. The Bottle Dungeon was carved—literally—out of rock. It consisted of a long narrow "neck" which bellied out into a circular "bottle," the shape of which could not be discerned from above until Joss Benmuir swung his flashlight into its depths. There were no steps cut in the "neck." The only method of getting down (or up) consisted of using a thick rope,

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currently coiled beside them, and fastened to an enormous iron ring in the stone.

Privately Jemima agreed with Lady Martin there was something foul about the gaping hole. She also fancied that there was a fetid smell. No light, not much air, and absolutely no sanitation beyond a tiny aperture in the rock at the bottom of the bottle which dropped to the sea—no wonder there was something dank and rotten in the atmosphere of the stone cell which contained the entrance to the dungeon. But since Jemima was an outsider at this house party, she decided to stay silent. She had been working with May Martin in recent months on a project for a television series tentatively entitled *A Woman's Right to Say Anything: The Female Political Voice in Various Totalitarian Countries*. She had become fond of the old lady, faintly ridiculous in her untidy appearance, certainly often ridiculed in the press for her views; yet ever gallant in her defence of those unable to speak for themselves. When her own New Year plans fell through, she had accepted Lady Martin's invitation to be her companion on the Scottish trip.

"Not really a party," Lady Martin had pronounced. "In spite of its being Hogmanay. There aren't any neighbours for miles. Plenty of time to work together." She hesitated. "Thank heaven you're not married; you'll take Joss's mind off that dreadful Clio Brown; then of course there's Robbie."

A slightly uncomfortable silence followed Robbie Benmuir's little sally about human rights. To May Martin at least such things were not a laughing matter. It was broken by Joss, who continued to gaze down into the dungeon as he spoke. "It's a tourist attraction, Aunt May. That's what it is. And a very fine one too. After all, who else would come to this desolate spot otherwise? So many finer castles, aren't there? And you know how I need the money." His tone was perfectly equable; nevertheless, the words only increased the general embarrassment. Joss was being deliberately provocative, as Jemima Shore already knew enough about the Benmuir family set-up to appreciate.

May Martin was probably rich enough to restore the crumbling castle (what remained of it) single-handed, but preferred to spend her money on good causes—which did not include Castle Crask. And there was nothing to stop her doing so. Although Joss and Robbie, the children of her late brother, were her only blood relations, May Martin's money came entirely from the man she had married comparatively late in her life and very late in his, Sir Ludwig Martin,

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founder of LudMart. She had confided to Jemima on the way up: "Joss wants me to 'invest' in Crask—his phrase. He should know by now that I only make strictly philanthropic investments, which does not include ancient masonry even if it is owned by my family."

As if there weren't enough tensions within the party already, thought Jemima, what with Clio Brown being once upon a time a girlfriend of Robbie. Clio Brown and her overweight and overanxious husband, Gerald (why on earth had she married him? The answer was, presumably, money), and now apparently—all too apparently this afternoon—Clio Brown and Joss. Jemima Shore had taken a strong dislike to Clio Brown. She hoped it was not jealousy on her part. Clio, with her cat's face and fashionably cropped dark hair, so tall, so slim, and at the same time so curved, was certainly amazingly good-looking. But there was something intensely disagreeable about her. Gerald bore the brunt of her bad moods: the sight of his red, perspiring face—even in the un-centrally heated castle he seemed perpetually hot—would remind Clio that she needed a handkerchief fetching from her bedroom. She seemed to take a malevolent pleasure in watching Gerald trying to fit his bulk up a curved stone staircase.

Joss Benmuir was right: Crask was indeed a desolate spot situated on a headland which ran out into the North Sea where even the harsh cries of the sea birds seemed to have something lonely and despairing about them. It had not always been so. Crask's moat was now dry, but its depth indicated that the castle had once acted as an important fortress, ready to repel foreign raiders and hand-off domestic assailants with equal ferocity. Its strategic position meant that some kind of defensive structure must always have existed on the site—there were even traces of a prehistoric *dun*—but the present castle had been predominantly built in the fourteenth century. It had however been badly battered during the Cromwellian invasion of Scotland and suffered again in the period of the Jacobite risings.

As Colonel Benmuir, father of Joss and Robbie, had been wont to lament: "It's centuries since we Benmuirs managed to find ourselves on the winning side." He sometimes added: "Perhaps that's where poor May gets her taste for losers from—the spirit of her ancestors."

Two substantial towers did however remain of the fourteenth century castle: but they were no longer joined by a great hall or other buildings. The space in between was occupied by grass and stones, some of which were big enough to cause unwary guests to stumble

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as they moved between the two separate structures which together made up the living quarters of the modern Benmuir family. There was no protection on the headland—mountains existed only in the distance—and the gusts of wind carried the sea spray inland and had been known to whirl umbrellas away. That had happened to Jemima Shore on the previous evening, so that her beautiful crushed velvet skirt had become sodden. Now, as they stood outside, a girl called Ellie MacSomething—attached to Robbie it seemed—who had suffered similarly with her tartan wool skirt, was bold enough to ask Joss why there was no covered way.

"It would blow away like your umbrella," Joss remarked blandly. "Wouldn't it, Robbie? At least you didn't stumble over a sheep: my father used to keep sheep here to deal with the grass. I got rid of them. Besides, we chaps like leading our own lives. Robbie has always got a home here. Until I marry, that is."

"And will you and your wife have separate towers when you marry?" There was something provocative about the way Ellie MacSomething was pursuing the matter and it occurred to Jemima that she might be thinking of transferring her affections from Robbie to his elder brother. Joss, with his pale face, the black hair falling romantically over the eyes with their heavy lids, had more the air of a Spanish grandee—an El Greco—than a Scot. Robbie, on the other hand, with his rosy, almost ruddy cheeks, his freckles, his brownish curly hair already slipping back on his forehead, and stocky figure was the same physical type as his Aunt May. Although Jemima had the impression of intelligence beneath Robbie's jokey manner, there was no doubt which brother was the better-looking and Joss was after all the owner of Crask (whatever that might mean).

"Separate towers for married couples! What a good idea!" said Clio Brown suddenly. "Gerald, I think we should get on much better like that. Towers with thick walls. Too thick for even your snores to penetrate." She smiled in her peculiar cat-like manner, the corners of her small, perfectly bowed mouth turning up as though she were contemplating a small mouse before her. The mouse however was her large husband. One could not say that Gerald Brown flushed, since his face was red enough already, nevertheless it was clear that the remark had wounded him—but then that was presumably the intention.

By unspoken agreement, the other guests turned back to their contemplation of the Bottle Dungeon. They had all been taken on a

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visit to Crask's famous attraction—if a dungeon could really be so described—as a post-lunch treat by their host. The light faded early on a midwinter Scottish afternoon and as Joss Benmuir jocularly observed: "We don't want to lose one of you down the neck, not on the eve of Hogmanay anyway, it might ruin our modest celebrations."

He touched the aperture with his toe. "There's one at St. Andrew's Castle but ours is a whole foot deeper. Twenty-six foot deep." Jemima shivered again. She still could not easily bear to contemplate the idea of a prisoner lowered into the depths and left—left without light, heat, food beyond what the captors condescended to lower, left in the filth, the prey to rats . . . for there were apparently rats there in the past, probably introduced down the neck by the jailers, since the drainage hole at the bottom was minute, too small for a mouse let alone a rat to enter. . . .

In desperation Jemima found herself asking, "Did anyone ever escape?" It was the best she could do to strike a more cheerful note. Before Joss could answer, May Martin said, very fiercely indeed: "The terrible thing is that people *lived,* not that they died. Death was *merciful* compared to what people endured down there. Sometimes for years. An amazing aspect of the human spirit: some people are survivors. Joss, I really think you should seal it off, not exhibit it, show some respect for the sufferings of human beings. . . ." Fortunately for Joss, he was able to ignore his aunt in favour of answering Jemima. "No one escaped." He pointed to some lettering cut in the side of the stone cell. "*Initus non abeat.* Medieval Latin. It means: Once in, you can't get out. Carved shortly after the castle was built, they think." Joss paused. "No one escaped without help, that is. Some prisoner, put down there for supporting John Knox, at the time of the Reformation, that sort of thing, did get out. But it turned out that the jailer's daughter had helped him out with a rope. Otherwise: *Initus non abeat.* That's a bottle dungeon for you."

"Just like marriage," said Clio Brown suddenly. "Once in, there's no way out. Unless you get help." At first the company assumed that this was merely one of Clio's unpleasant interjections intended primarily to bait her husband. But it turned out that she had more to say. "I want to go down, Joss. I want to see what it's like. It could be quite an experience. I want to spend the night down there. It should be—" she lifted her lips in her little cat's smile again "—gloriously private. Look how narrow that neck is. Gerald, I don't believe you could fit down there, even if the rope would hold you."

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There was polite laughter from those like Ellie and Jemima who decided to pretend that Clio was joking. Gerald merely spluttered: but this time there was no doubt at all in Jemima's mind that he was seriously angry, and Clio might find she had gone for once a little too far. She did not however act as if she was aware of her husband's rage. On the contrary, she persisted in talking about her descent, cajoled Joss into revealing that there was a rope ladder for emergencies, narrow but serviceable, in a locked cupboard in the corner of the cell, and finally provoked Gerald into shouting at her:

"If that's how you want to see the New Year in, goddamnit, don't count on finding me in a very good mood tomorrow morning."

"I don't count on finding you at all tomorrow morning, Gerald, if you go on shouting like this," replied Clio smoothly. "You're straining yourself dreadfully with all that shouting, and you know what the doctor said. Rage is not healthful." Clio sounded so primly reproachful that you might almost have thought that the previous scene in which she deliberately provoked her husband's anger had not taken place.

"And wouldn't you be pleased?" snarled Gerald. "A rich widow. Well, don't count on that either." The embarrassment continued.

Afterwards it became important as to who had first suggested the bet. Was it Joss, his eyes black as he challenged Clio in a way that seemed positively sexual even at the comparatively asexual hour of three o'clock in the afternoon? Or perhaps frivolous, giggly Ellie, seeking to stir up further trouble? Or the much calmer and more self-possessed Robbie, with exactly the opposite aim of defusing the situation? Jemima had certainly not done so—she continued to regard the Bottle Dungeon with revulsion—while Lady Martin made her indignation quite obvious.

"Sensation-monger!" she said to Jemima in an aside which was clearly intended to be heard. "The sort of person who collects Nazi mementos for kicks."

Gerald had been the first one actually to use the word "bet."

"I bet you won't stay down there for one hour, Clio, let alone for one night." Then he stumped away from the party, with the words: "Do what you damn well please! You always do." But it was after that the real bet somehow evolved: the bet that Clio would be lowered down by the little ladder, as warmly clad as possible, with sleeping bag and flashlight, and a pocket heater, generally used out shooting, to warm her hands. This lowering would take place at

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eleven o'clock that night. She would be formally let out—let up—one hour later, with the New Year.

"And what does she get if she wins the bet?" asked Ellie, who had gone back to twining herself round Robbie again.

"I get to choose how I spend the rest of the night." Jemima swore that Clio actually licked her lips when she said that; certainly there was a flicker of her little red tongue as she smiled. "Which means," she went on, looking at each of the three men in turn, ending with her husband, now some distance away, "I get to spend it alone."

It was not until dinnertime, when all had changed, including Clio, who wore a black lycra cat suit, that Robbie made the obvious point.

"I've just realised she's bound to win the bet, isn't she? Unless she dies of fright or something awful like that. You see if Clio does want to come up—come up early and lose the bet—she has no way of letting us know, has she? She just has to sit it out down there—yuk—until we come and get her. Next year."

So it was agreed that Clio should be installed with a large noisy bell, which Robbie found, once used to summon labourers for lunch. If the bell was heard to ring, it would be regarded as a sign that Clio needed help and the bet was off.

"Send not to know for whom the bell tolls"—Robbie being jokey again—"because it will definitely be Clio. After all, once in you can't get out. Without help. Good family motto that, Joss, we should use it. After all, we Benmuirs are always getting into things we can't get out of, aren't we—relationships, debt, that sort of thing." Lady Martin and Joss both frowned.

The presence of the bell meant that the door to the stone cell had to be left open: Robbie was not sure the clang from the depths would otherwise be heard. But no one felt that to be a problem. The door was clearly visible across the rough grass from the Big Tower where the party was congregated in the big sitting room on the first floor, also used as a dining room on festive occasions, with its high windows and seats in the embrasures. Nobody could rescue Clio early—supposing anyone was minded to do so—without being observed.

"Not even to drop down the teeniest reviving malt whiskey"—Robbie, determinedly lighthearted again. But none of the badinage was really very lighthearted. Something—what exactly and when?—had gone too far. A troublemaking young woman, a stupid bet, what a recipe for New Year's Eve! (Jemima Shore wished she were at home, celebrating with her cat, appropriately named Midnight). About

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ten-thirty both Gerald Brown and Lady Martin decided to opt out of proceedings—including the seeing-in of the New Year—and went to their respective beds. The Browns were sleeping in the Little Tower, or Robbie's Tower, together with Ellie and Robbie himself; Lady Martin and Jemima were housed still higher up in the Big Tower. Joss, as host, now politely insisted on escorting Lady Martin upstairs, despite her protests about knowing the way perfectly well.

"But Joss, I grew up here!" she exclaimed. Perhaps he intended to make his touch at this point, thought Jemima, although it was scarcely a tactful moment with her disapproval so manifest. Gerald's bulky figure could be seen crossing the grass, bending slightly as he fronted the wind. The moon, almost full, had now risen, and with its eerie glow on the stones, did something to supplement the inadequate lighting of the passage between the two towers. After a short while Clio said crossly:

"I hope he hasn't gone to sleep already. I've got to put a great many things over this." She stretched out in her skin-tight black suit: she really did have the most beautiful lissome figure, small high breasts clearly visible under the lycra, and the narrow thighs and long, long legs of a model; she actually could wear her cat suit and get away with it. "I'll be back," said Clio. "May he not be *snoring*, that's all I ask."

A few moments later they watched Clio in her turn cross the grass, a cumbersome parka over her cat suit, as the winds tossed her short hair. Whatever passed between the Browns on the first floor of the Little Tower must however have been vaguely conciliatory because they saw Gerald at the window, raising his hand and waving. His mood must have improved since he left. Clio reappeared shortly afterwards.

"Of course he's in a better temper!" she exclaimed. "He just thinks I'll lose, that's why. He's really a cunning old sod, that one. Convinced I'll panic and ring the bell. Such a downer. I really can't think why I married him." Jemima, looking at her, now more of a Michelin woman in her jerseys, thought: Why did he marry you? Do some men just like to be humiliated? Answer, I suppose: yes.

In the event, the actual descent of Clio on the rope ladder was a slight anti-climax. Her sleek head had disappeared from view into the Bottle Dungeon without anything more dramatic happening than her own voice echoing upwards: "It's great down here, the new holiday spot, can't think why those prisoners complained."

"Any rats?" called Robbie.

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"They're all upstairs," Clio shouted back. "Or asleep." She was in her usual form. The flashlight was seen to cast its sepulchral glow upwards, the bell was tested (it sounded very loud), and then there was nothing to do but brave the wind and go back to the Big Tower again and wait.

There nobody could quite think how to fill in the time. The general clear view of the open door of the cell meant that it was impossible to forget Clio. Joss, their host, had fallen moodily silent, his thoughts no doubt with her. The hour looked like passing slowly until Robbie decided to organise them.

"Here we are, four people in search of an occupation. Is it to be a foursome reel or bridge?"

Although Ellie clapped her hands and voted for a reel, Jemima hastily pointed out she did not know how to dance a reel. So they all four settled for bridge. After that the time did pass a little quicker, although the fact that the bridge table was placed in the embrasure containing the big window meant that the Bottle Dungeon—and Clio—remained somewhere in Jemima's thoughts at least. Nor did the bridge prove quite the engrossing occupation for herself and Ellie they might have anticipated. The Benmuir brothers, Joss playing with Jemima, and Robbie with Ellie, played virtually every hand themselves, bidding, it seemed, with the aim of so doing. The one hand Jemima did play, Joss peered over her shoulder silently, but somehow, she felt, critically. Ellie never got to play a single hand.

It was actually Robbie who was busy making six spades—his luck was in—when they heard the bell ring. It rang loudly, the sound melted away into the wind, then it rang again. Instinctively Jemima looked at her watch: it was ten minutes to twelve. The others simply jumped up; then all of them started to run down the twisting stair, Joss pushing open the door, and out across the moonlit grass. Ellie stumbled twice but Robbie did not stop to help her. The brothers reached the cell together, leading Jemima herself by at least fifteen yards. By the time she arrived, the rope ladder was already being lowered and Joss was speaking soothing words to Clio—soothing and openly tender. But then Gerald was not present.

"Now then, darling, it's going to be all right. Trust Joss. Easy goes. Come on, my beautiful darling."

And after a few moments, Clio's head emerged once again: but it was a very different Clio, tear-stained, dirty—filthy dirty—and more or less incoherent. Jemima felt no particular pleasure at the

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sight; as a matter of fact, she found she preferred the confident if disagreeable Clio to this pathetic victim. Finally, how little Clio had known herself! She had been so sure of her own nerves, and so absolutely wrong when it came to the crunch. "The shadows, the ghosts of the prisoners trying to kill me," were some of the things Clio babbled about. At least Lady Martin might have been pleased at this last-minute sensitivity to the sufferings of people in the past. Still hysterical, Clio was led away in the direction of the Little Tower; it was now Robbie, not Joss, who took her arm, as though in tacit agreement that the Little Tower was "Robbie's." Joss, Ellie, and Jemima trailed after them.

"Nobody ever asked what would happen if she lost the bet!" cried Ellie suddenly: Jemima guessed she was annoyed at Robbie's attention to Clio.

"She gets to spend the night with Gerald," snapped Joss, evidently made equally tense by the sight of Robbie's arm round Clio. Ellie continued to gaze after them.

"My room is on the ground floor, overlooking the sea," she said. "I suppose I'd better go to it. It must be midnight by now. Happy New Year." Ellie did not even try to sound sincere. The door above their heads opened and shut; immediately Robbie came clattering back down the stairs; Clio had been tactfully left to face Gerald—if awake—by herself. Ellie was therefore looking slightly happier when Clio started to scream for the second time that night. This time there were no sobs, just sheer horror. What Clio was screaming over and over again, as she half ran, half fell down the stairway till she reached Robbie (and Joss), was this:

"He's dead, he's dead." Then: "Gerald, Gerald." Then more screams. It was Robbie who slapped Clio's face but it was Joss who shouted at her—almost as loudly as her own screams: "What do you mean, girl? How can he be dead?"

"He's dead," wailed Clio in a quieter tone. "I got into the bed, I touched something. It was a scarf. A long woollen scarf! A horrible thing. Red and purple squares." She gulped. "I pulled it. It didn't move. I put on the light. It was round his neck. He's dead. Gerald's dead."

"My scarf!" screamed Ellie in her turn. "That's my scarf!"

What followed was one of the most dreadful New Year's Days that Jemima had ever spent. The Crask headland and its castle was like something under an evil spell. Dawn came late and brought with

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it lurid red streaks over the North Sea: diabolic colours, thought Jemima.

The police in the person of one solitary officer took a long time to reach them: the nearest police station was after all over twenty-five miles away, and the force in general was occupied by drivers in distress, drunken drivers, and drunks pure and simple. The police doctor, summoned by him, took even longer to arrive; arrangements to take away the corpse—yes, Gerald had been strangled and with Ellie's woollen scarf—would take a while to make. In the meantime the corpse was locked inside the Browns' room, while Robbie, Ellie, and of course Clio took refuge in the Big Tower.

No one could leave the castle; statements would have to be made, evidence taken. The remaining occupants of Crask sat around in the big sitting room, as though in a daze.

At one point Ellie, who seemed personally angry with a situation so clearly devoid of any element of enjoyment, burst out: "It must have been some tramp. He could have got in by the back door, through that kitchenette. Some maniac. He could still be lurking. And he took my scarf!" Nobody answered her. After a while Robbie patted her hand. But nobody for the time being chose to go and sleep. When Lady Martin was wakened—by Joss—and told of the tragedy, she too joined them: with her curly grey hair, in her tartan dressing gown, she had the air of some cozy family nanny.

What Lady Martin said to Jemima later that morning was however the reverse of cozy. Joss was talking to the police; Clio was lying down in his room (which he had made over to her); Robbie and Ellie were in the kitchen trying to organise some kind of meal in the absence of any local help at Hogmanay.

"She did it! Of course that wicked Clio Brown did it." Lady Martin's voice shook slightly in the passion of her conviction; she might have been lobbying a recalcitrant politician for the rights of the forgotten. "I recognise evil when I see it. People think I'm blind to the bad side of life—but what do they know about me? On the contrary, I've seen so much of it that I recognise it instantly. Clio Brown has no moral sense. She never had when she flirted with Robbie in the first place, then abandoned him for Gerald, all for the sake of the Brown money. Then she wasn't even grateful to Gerald for that—"

Jemima realised that May Martin, another woman who had married a rich man, was subconsciously contrasting Clio's behaviour with her own: she gathered May had been extremely attentive to

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Sir Ludwig during their brief and harmonious marriage.

"Now she's done away with him in order to marry Joss and queen it here at Benmuir." Lady Martin paused in her harangue. "Yes, Jemima, I'm afraid my nephew Joss is not exactly a moral person either. Clio and Joss: they're alike in that way. Oh ye gods! Money, and what people will do for it." An unbidden thought came to Jemima that Lady Martin could perhaps have prevented all this, whatever it was that had happened, by helping her nephew with Benmuir. She dismissed the thought. Who was she, Jemima, to say that family feeling should be put before human rights? She herself had no family.

"Listen, my friend," said Jemima in her most soothing interviewer's manner, patting the tartan-clad knee. "It's out of the question. Clio couldn't have done it. Gerald was alive when she went into the Bottle Dungeon, we know he was, and dead when she came out of it. So she couldn't have done it. No one gets out of the Bottle Dungeon without help. That motto carved in the stone—how does it go?"

All the time, however, Jemima was thinking fiercely beneath her tranquil front: I'm right, aren't I? She couldn't have done it, could she? She went over to the Little Tower, we saw her go. Gerald waved her goodbye, we saw him. A few minutes later she was back with us. Then she went down into the dungeon, we watched her, the ladder was pulled up and put aside, we could all see the stone cell from the Big Tower window. She couldn't have got out without being seen. The boys, above all *Joss:* no, he was here, we were all here. Even when Joss was dummy, he kept looking over my shoulder. Robbie never left the bridge table. If anyone went to the loo—maybe Ellie did when she was dummy—she would simply have gone to that little turret cloakroom on the same floor, one instant away; you'd have noticed a longer absence.

Jemima pursued her thoughts. And yet Gerald was dead when Clio was released. He must have been. Robbie took her up to her bedroom door and came straight down, we heard him. Besides, Gerald's body was beginning to grow cold. Jemima shuddered as she thought: I touched him.

To distract herself, she repeated: "How does the motto go?"

"Like this. *Initus*—once you're in—*non abeat*—you can't get out. The only Latin I know." Lady Martin sounded weary. "Girls in our family weren't taught Latin. Not that it would have been much use to me, as things turned out. I did learn first aid and nursing, much

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more useful, handling people the right way." Her voice trailed away.

Afterwards Jemima would look back on this conversation as crucial, and Lady Martin as the person who in all fairness was really responsible for solving the case. At the time she merely felt some stirring of comprehension, as though recent events, if looked at from the opposite angle, might be understood altogether differently—and correctly.

Jemima jumped up. "Will you be all right, May? I need—fresh air." On her way out of the Big Tower, Jemima stopped by the open door to the sitting room. Joss was standing there, looking out of the window. When she reached the ground floor, she could hear Robbie and Ellie in the kitchen. Jemima caught the words: "My scarf." Ellie was still complaining. She grabbed her own coat from the pile in the hall and passed rapidly out of doors. She walked across the grass, towards the stone cell, bending slightly in the wind. Jemima was conscious that Joss must be watching her from the window, as they had watched first Gerald, then Clio, the evening before. The door of the cell was still open; no one had thought to close it.

Jemima entered. The fetid reek from the open mouth of the Bottle Dungeon seemed to her stronger than ever: a reek of death. After all, if some prisoners had lived, in torment, others had died here. She remembered Clio's provocative comparison of the dungeon to marriage, a state from which she could not emerge without help. Gerald, of course, like some of the past prisoners, had emerged from it through death. The stone words were just visible above her head in the dim light. She traced them with her finger.

Initus. . . . Suddenly she understood.

At that moment there was a noise behind her. Jemima turned cautiously round; she did not want to lose her footing. "Joss! You gave me a fright. I might have hurtled down into the depths."

"I wouldn't have let that happen. No more tragedies." Joss was blocking the light so that Jemima could not see his expression.

"How's Clio?"

"As well as can be expected." It was impossible to tell whether the cliché was intended sarcastically without seeing Joss's face. The effect was to make Jemima eager to get out of the cell, away from the pervasive stink which came from the dungeon, into the sea wind. She moved towards the door but Joss continued to block it.

"Any theories?" he asked. "Any theories, Jemima Shore Investigator?" He used the title of her television series by which the public

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generally identified her, but he made the words seem threatening. "Do you buy Ellie's tramp or Ellie's maniac?"

"*Are* there tramps in this remote spot? You tell me. But as for maniacs, I suppose you find them anywhere."

"Like criminals."

"Exactly." Jemima knew her voice was beginning to sound stifled. "The air, Joss," she began, "the air in here—" Then she realised what she must say. "One thing I do know: nobody in the party could have done it." May God forgive her for the lie: but like any prisoner she needed to get out.

"Is that so?"

"How could they? We were all together all the time, weren't we? Except for Clio, that is."

"And she was—here." Joss stepped forward as though to peer into the hole.

"Quite rare and absolutely horrible." Jemima was pleased to find her voice was under control. "No wonder Clio panicked and sounded the bell."

Joss moved aside. Jemima stepped out. She was now in the full view of the first floor of the Big Tower, where she could make out Robbie and Ellie standing together. They must be able to see her. She was safe. Nevertheless, Jemima chose to walk a number of yards away from the stone cell in the direction of the Big Tower. Then she saw Clio coming out of the great door. Her short black hair became rapidly windblown; she was wearing a parka over the black suit she had worn the night before. Clio came and leant against Joss. He gave the impression of being quite indifferent to what anyone might think of this. Jemima had a fierce impulse to disturb that feline composure. She took a deep breath.

"Yes, you are alike," she said sharply to Joss. "Your aunt was right. Not only in your natures but physically alike. Both of you tall with short black hair. How could we tell the difference from the Big Tower? A parka over black trousers. We thought it was Clio. It was you, Joss. After you took May to her room. You killed him, didn't you?" Jemima still addressed Joss. "You took Ellie's scarf from her room to kill him. Then you made him wave out of the window, took up his arm and manipulated him, handled him. So that we were certain he was alive. Minutes later Clio came back into the sitting room, as if she'd just crossed the grass in the dark. But she'd been downstairs all along. And together you set up the bet. Another piece of handling."

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"What's she saying, darling? Why is she saying these horrible things?" Clio sounded merely plaintive; she still looked perfectly, composedly beautiful.

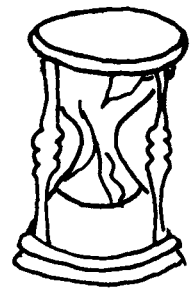
Joss said nothing. He continued to gaze impassively at Jemima. She was glad to be under the protective gaze of Robbie and Ellie.

"*Initus non abeat.* Once in, you can't get out. The motto," cried Jemima. "But Clio wasn't actually *in* the dungeon when Gerald died. That was all a plot, a distraction to get our attention. She was lurking downstairs among all the coats, finding jerseys there, letting *you* do it, Joss. Afterwards, Clio's panic in the dungeon may well have been genuine, ringing that bell that Robbie found. She was alone, she had connived at the murder of her husband: and of course the bell made for another distraction."

"Prove it," said Joss coldly to Jemima. To Clio he said: "Pay no attention, she's mad. Media people! We should never have let Aunt May bring her. Unhinged!"

"I can't prove it. That's for the police." As though on cue, Jemima was aware of the distinctive Scottish police car driving towards the gates of the castle to her right. "All I know is: you were in it together. And you're still in it together: this is one Bottle Dungeon with two prisoners inside it. A desperate kind of marriage: your word, Clio. Until one of you turns on the other, that is."

As the police car drove nearer, Jemima saw Clio's slanting cat's eyes slide away from Joss. Clio was in deep, as deep as she had been down in those fetid depths. But Clio was going to try to get out. She'll betray him, thought Jemima, and after all he did the killing. What was it May Martin said that afternoon by the dungeon? Some people are survivors.



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a distinguished reprint by

JAMES THURBER

From one of America's late great humorists, a black-comedy on that ever-popular subject of crime writers, the spouse murder . . .

MR. PREBLE GETS RID OF HIS WIFE

by JAMES THURBER

Mr. Preble was a plump, middle-aged lawyer in Scarsdale. He used to kid with his stenographer about running away with him. "Let's run away together," he would say, during a pause in dictation. "All righty," she would say.

One rainy Monday afternoon, Mr. Preble was more serious about it than usual.

"Let's run away together," said Mr. Preble.

"All righty," said his stenographer. Mr. Preble jingled the keys in his pocket and looked out the window.

"My wife would be glad to get rid of me," he said.

"Would she give you a divorce?" asked the stenographer.

"I don't suppose so," he said. The stenographer laughed.

"You'd have to get rid of your wife," she said.

Mr. Preble was unusually silent at dinner that night. About half an hour after coffee, he spoke without looking up from his paper.

"Let's go down in the cellar," Mr. Preble said to his wife.

"What for?" she said, not looking up from her book.

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "We never go down in the cellar any more. The way we used to."

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"We never did go down in the cellar that I remember," said Mrs. Preble. "I could rest easy the balance of my life if I never went down in the cellar." Mr. Preble was silent for several minutes.

"Supposing I said it meant a whole lot to me," began Mr. Preble.

"What's come over you?" his wife demanded. "It's cold down there and there is absolutely nothing to do."

"We could pick up pieces of coal," said Mr. Preble. "We might get up some kind of a game with pieces of coal."

"I don't want to," said his wife. "Anyway, I'm reading."

"Listen," said Mr. Preble, rising and walking up and down. "Why won't you come down in the cellar? You can read down there, as far as that goes."

"There isn't a good enough light down there," she said, "and anyway, I'm not going to go down in the cellar. You may as well make up your mind to that."

"Gee whiz!" said Mr. Preble, kicking at the edge of a rug. "Other people's wives go down in the cellar. Why is it you never want to do anything! I come home worn out from the office and you won't even go down in the cellar with me. God knows it isn't very far—it isn't as if I was asking you to go to the movies or someplace."

"I don't want to *go!*" shouted Mrs. Preble. Mr. Preble sat down on the edge of a davenport.

"All right, all *right,*" he said. He picked up the newspaper again. "I wish you'd let me tell you more about it. It's—kind of a surprise."

"Will you quit harping on that subject?" asked Mrs. Preble.

"Listen," said Mr. Preble, leaping to his feet. "I might as well tell you the truth instead of beating around the bush. I want to get rid of you so I can marry my stenographer. Is there anything especially wrong about that? People do it every day. Love is something you can't control—"

"We've been all over that," said Mrs. Preble. "I'm not going to go all over that again."

"I just wanted you to know how things are," said Mr. Preble. "But you have to take everything so literally. Good Lord, do you suppose I really wanted to go down in the cellar and make up some silly game with pieces of coal?"

"I never believed that for a minute," said Mrs. Preble. "I knew all along you wanted to get me down there and bury me."

"You can say that now—after I told you," said Mr. Preble. "But it would never have occurred to you if I hadn't."

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"You didn't tell me; I got it out of you," said Mrs. Preble. "Anyway, I'm always two steps ahead of what you're thinking."

"You're never within a mile of what I'm thinking," said Mr. Preble.

"Is that so? I knew you wanted to bury me the minute you set foot in this house tonight." Mrs. Preble held him with a glare.

"Now that's just plain damn exaggeration," said Mr. Preble, considerably annoyed. "You knew nothing of the sort. As a matter of fact, I never thought of it till just a few minutes ago."

"It was in the back of your mind," said Mrs. Preble. "I suppose this filing woman put you up to it."

"You needn't get sarcastic," said Mr. Preble. "I have plenty of people to file without having her file. She doesn't know anything about this. She isn't in on it. I was going to tell her you had gone to visit some friends and fell over a cliff. She wants me to get a divorce."

"That's a laugh," said Mrs. Preble. *"That's* a laugh. You may bury me, but you'll never get a divorce."

"She knows that! I told her that," said Mr. Preble. "I mean—I told her I'd never get a divorce."

"Oh, you probably told her about burying me, too," said Mrs. Preble.

"That's not true," said Mr. Preble, with dignity. "That's between you and me. I was never going to tell a soul."

"You'd blab it to the whole world; don't tell me," said Mrs. Preble. "I know you." Mr. Preble puffed at his cigar.

"I wish you were buried now and it was all over with," he said.

"Don't you suppose you would get caught, you crazy thing?" she said. "They always get caught. Why don't you go to bed? You're just getting yourself all worked up over nothing."

"I'm not going to bed," said Mr. Preble. "I'm going to bury you in the cellar. I've got my mind made up to it. I don't know how I could make it any plainer."

"Listen," cried Mrs. Preble, throwing her book down, "will you be satisfied and shut up if I go down in the cellar? Can I have a little peace if I go down in the cellar? Will you let me alone then?"

"Yes," said Mr. Preble. "But you spoil it by taking that attitude."

"Sure, sure, I always spoil everything. I stop reading right in the middle of a chapter. I'll never know how the story comes out—but that's nothing to you."

"Did I make you start reading the book?" asked Mr. Preble. He opened the cellar door. "Here, you go first."

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"Brrr," said Mrs. Preble, starting down the steps. "It's *cold* down here! You *would* think of this, at this time of year! Any other husband would have buried his wife in the summer."

"You can't arrange those things just whenever you want to," said Mr. Preble. "I didn't fall in love with this girl till late fall."

"Anybody else would have fallen in love with her long before that. She's been around for years. Why is it you always let other men get in ahead of you? Mercy, but it's dirty down here! What have you got there?"

"I was going to hit you over the head with this shovel," said Mr. Preble.

"You were, huh?" said Mrs. Preble. "Well, get that out of your mind. Do you want to leave a great big clue right here in the middle of everything where the first detective that comes snooping around will find it? Go out in the street and find some piece of iron or something—something that doesn't belong to you."

"Oh, all right," said Mr. Preble. "But there won't be any piece of iron in the street. Women always expect to pick up a piece of iron anywhere."

"If you look in the right place, you'll find it," said Mrs. Preble. "And don't be gone long. Don't you dare stop in at the cigar store. I'm not going to stand down here in this cold cellar all night and freeze."

"All right," said Mr. Preble. "I'll hurry."

"And shut that *door* behind you!" she screamed after him. "Where were you born—in a barn?"

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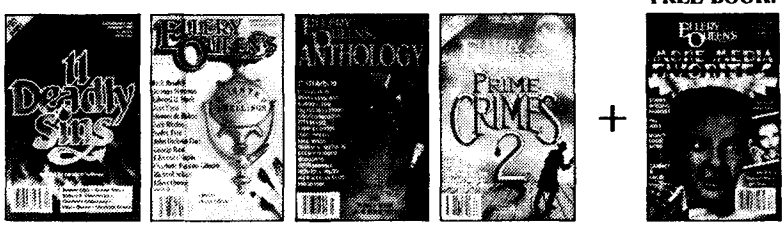

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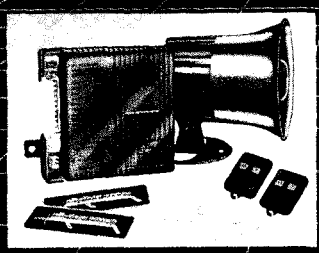

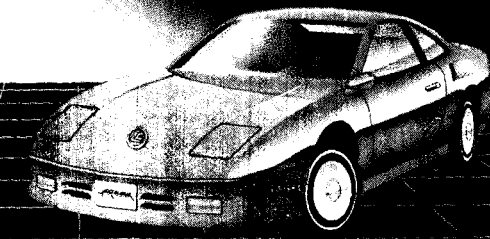

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